

Disembodied Heads in
Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Intersections

Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture

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VOLUME 28 – 2013

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Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Edited by

Catrien Santing, Barbara Baert &
Anita Traninger



BRILL

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2013

Cover illustration: Anonymous (Seville), Heads of Paul, John the Baptist and Jacob, 1660–1670. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Disembodied heads in medieval and early modern culture / edited by Catrien Santing, Barbara Baert & Anita Traninger.

pages cm — (Intersections ; volume 28)

Outcome of a two-day conference held at the Academia Belgica and the Royal Dutch Institute at Rome.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-25354-4 (hardback : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-90-04-25355-1 (e-book)

1. Head—Social aspects—Congresses. 2. Human body—Social aspects—Congresses.

I. Baert, Barbara, editor of compilation. II. Traninger, Anita, editor of compilation. III. Santing, Catrien, editor of compilation.

GT498.H43D58 2013

306.4_dc23

2013019689

This publication has been typeset in the multilingual “Brill” typeface. With over 5,100 characters covering Latin, IPA, Greek, and Cyrillic, this typeface is especially suitable for use in the humanities. For more information, please see www.brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 1568-1181

ISBN 978-90-04-25354-4 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-25355-1 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the outcome of a two-day conference held at the Academia Belgica and the Royal Dutch Institute at Rome. Both institutes deserve much gratitude for their financial and practical assistance, and especially their generous hospitality. Without the efforts of Dr. Hans de Valk, Prof. Bernard Stolte and Prof. Walter Geerts, *Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* could not have been realised.

Today the organisation of conferences is impossible without the gracious backing of employers. Both the University of Louvain and the University of Groningen therefore deserve great credit for allowing us to travel to Rome at the beginning of term to spend research time on this project and for providing most of the financial means. This especially regards the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vlaanderen (FWO) and the Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture (ICOG).

In the final stages, the editors became acutely aware that the publication of a collection of papers is a serious endeavour. Paul Arblaster was our tower of strength, patiently helping the non-native speakers to improve the level of their academic English. Anita Traninger gave us priceless advice on the content and fortunately was willing to seek out the correct wording of so many disembodied, separated, severed or even bodiless heads together with us, a joint venture that much improved the book as a whole. We very much appreciate her patience with us and her diligence. Immense gratitude deserves Frank Birkenholz, who undertook the checking of footnotes and captions and other sometimes extremely arduous tasks. We would also like to thank Soetkin Vanhauwaert, who dedicated herself to the illustrations and all the associated difficulties in this regard.

Collections of articles focused on a single topic require close cooperation, willingness, flexibility and also much staying power from contributors. During the whole process all of the contributors have been willing to respond to our queries and requests for amendments and additions. The positive attitude of our authors was indispensable for bringing this book to a favourable conclusion without false notes along the way, making the whole project a pleasure for us. We would also like to mention and thank Dominic-Alain Boariu (University of Fribourg) and Jeanette Kohl (University of California, Riverside), who presented inspiring papers

at the conference, but unfortunately did not have the time to submit an article to this volume.

Last but not least, our deep appreciation goes to Brill Publishers and its helpful employees. We are most grateful to the general editor of the series, *Intersections. Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture*, Prof. Karl Enenkel, for giving us the opportunity to publish and the room to experiment with our strange topic, not to mention his willingness to offer advice and assistance.

Catrien Santing & Barbara Baert

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INTRODUCTION

Catrien Santing and Barbara Baert

Do heads excite a desire to chop them off; a desire to decapitate and take a human life, as anthropologists have suggested? In other words, is there a head hunter hidden inside every human being?¹ Readers of this book might suspect its authors and editors of cruel inclinations and although we do not see ourselves as such it is true that the contributors are fascinated by what we have called 'disembodied heads'. We have pursued these heads with great enthusiasm in their medieval and early modern disguises and representations, including the metaphorical. This fatal attraction towards the head can be explained above all by the fact that in medieval and early modern cultures the head was usually considered the most important part of the body. The basis for this claim was that it accommodated the soul and directed bodily functions. This primacy was only contested to some extent by the heart, a position that mainly found religious backing.

Being puzzled and feeling challenged by the historical urge to privilege certain human body parts above others, we decided to take issue with the historical hierarchy of human organs. Our primordial aim was to throw light on as many aspects, functions and contexts of its leading member – the head – as possible, including the theological/religious, medical, scientific, political, historical and art historical. Sometimes heads are discussed within a specific domain, but more often the phenomenon of head reverence is studied in relation to other fields, collapsing the distinctions between these fields. Heads were always the centre of a configuration of meanings and we have tried to pay respect to their individual as well as collective voice. Since we also attempted to use beliefs, mythologies and traditions concerning the head, the result might be deemed an attempt to establish a 'cultural anatomy' of this body part, to borrow the central concept of Claudia Benthien's and Christoph Wulf's *Körperteile. Eine kulturelle Anatomie* (2001). In this attempt we have confronted the connection between the organic and symbolic wholeness of the body and the

¹ Stahl P.-H., *Histoire de la décapitation* (Paris: 1986), and Le Goff J., "Head or Heart? The Political Use of Body Metaphors in the Middle Ages", in Feher M. (ed.) *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 3 vols. (New York: 1989) vol. III, 12–27, 13.

significance of its most precious part, the *pars pro toto* par excellence: the head.² In devising our topic we were much assisted by David Hillmann's and Carla Mazzio's *The Body in Parts* (1997) and by Caroline Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991).³ Both collections of essays were inspiring in their exploitation of historical ideas on fragmentation and the ways aspects of culture have been invested in human body parts.

Securing or severing the head usually implies wilfully putting a creature to death, denying them further existence. To emphasise the fact that there are many kinds of detached heads with cultic functions, which have not necessarily been cut off, we opted for the term 'disembodied heads'. By 'disembodied' we mean nothing more than having become detached from its original bodily context and having a new life in this distinct separated status, including the attainment of new functions and significance. In our view decapitation practices and other procedures of isolating and subsequently iconising the human head always carry beliefs or at least assumptions about supposed individual 'capital authority'. It is precisely these convictions, woven together with the various types of disembodied heads and their functions, as well as their material and symbolic qualities, that are mapped, explored and explained in this book.⁴

The rise of cultic body-part reliquaries in the Early Christian Church demonstrates a general awareness of fragmented human bodies, amongst which head relics held an eminent position.⁵ In the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, saintly heads appear mostly as skulls. This requires stripping down a fleshy body part and its sensory organs to uncover a bony structure. Even today, of all human remains, the skull is the most instantly recognisable of human body parts, and it tends to survive more often than other human body parts due to both its solid material quality and its symbolic richness, in combination with a strong power of expression. Some of the venerated crania were products of decapitation,

² Benthien C. – Wulf C. (eds.), *Körperteile. Eine kulturelle Anatomie* (Reinbek b.H.: 2001).

³ Hillmann D.A. – Mazzio C., *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: 1997) and Walker Bynum C., *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: 1991).

⁴ Very recently the theme of decapitation was explored in: Tracy L. – Massey J., *Heads Will Roll. Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* (Leiden: 2012). This book concentrates on the representation of decapitation practices in literature. Unfortunately, it appeared after the deadline for this collection and thus could not be worked into our contributions.

⁵ As well as heads, arms were also extremely important body-part relics and were likewise considered to be expressive and communicative, on this see Hahn C., "The Voices of Saints: Speaking Reliquaries", *Gesta* 36 (1997) 20–31.

but others were carefully severed post-mortem in order to create a relic. The corpses of holy men or women soon became precious material. After their demise, saints such as Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Siena were carved up, with their heads becoming extremely precious relics. The head of the former found its resting place, after being passed around quite a bit, in the French town of Toulouse, while that of the latter was taken back to her home town, Siena.⁶

Heads severed in the execution of a sentence of death constitute a special category. Execution by severing the head of the victim with a sword was the common beginning of martyrdom, with many saints from the Early Church dying in this way. This does not mean that decapitation was dishonourable *tout court*, a qualification, moreover, that not only applies to martyred saints. For the whole period under consideration here, aristocrats facing capital punishment were granted death by beheading rather than the usual hanging, cases of heresy excepted.⁷ In order to leave no human remnants at all, public and obstinate rejection of orthodox beliefs led to burning at the stake.

The bodies of martyrs from Late Antiquity tended to resist the separation consequent to their beheading in the most literal way, as, paradoxically, after having been put to death these saints managed briefly to stay alive. They picked up their detached head, took it in their arms, and walked to the place where they wished to rest forever with the remainder of their body. Hence they are known as *cephalophores*, 'head carriers'. This designation refers to martyrs who temporarily survived their decapitation and who continued to attest to their beliefs until they reached their final burial ground. Frequently such post-mortem physical activity involved verbally professing one's faith, demonstrating that it was impossible to silence God's voice in his advocates. As Jacobus de Voragine's compilation tells us, Saint Denis's mouth, to mention the best-known representative of all *cephalophores*, continued to preach while he walked ten kilometres with his head in his hands from Montmartre to his burial place, the present basilica of Saint Denis.⁸ Another subcategory is the severed head that has

⁶ Conway P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas of the Order of Preachers (1225–1274). A Biographical Study of the Angelic Doctor* (London: 1911) ch. X, <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/conway04> and Parson G., *The Cult of Saint Catherine of Siena. A Study in Civil Religion* (Aldershot: 2008) 20.

⁷ Carlino A., *Books of the Body. Anatomical Ritual and Renaissance Learning*, trans. J. Tedeschi – A. Tedeschi (Chicago-London: 1999). See also Esther Cohen in this volume.

⁸ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Reading on the Saints*, ed. W.G. Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton N.J.: 1993) vol. II, 236–241.

become a relic and consequently functions as the centre of a cult, as in the case of the head of St John the Baptist. We find his decapitated head as a skull relic in several places, but often the *Johannes in disco* was also recreated in sculpture to invoke its former full fleshy status, as well as represented two-dimensionally on canvas.⁹

Speaking heads appealed to the medieval and early modern imagination, but it has to be admitted that apart from St John's head the denotations of the phenomenon were not altogether favourable. Their sight brought to mind the pernicious power of Medusa's head, killing the onlooker or carrying them along in its misfortune. A telling example is the beheaded troubadour Bertrand de Born, who greets Dante and Virgil in the eighth circle of Hell – the residence of those who sowed discord – his head saying: 'Because I cut the bonds of those so joined, I bear my head cut off from its life-source, which is back there, alas, within its trunk. In me you see the perfect contrapasso'.¹⁰ The theme of the evil talking head was taken further by the construction of mechanical heads that functioned as magical or theatrical devices. They spoke the truth or predicted the future. These devices were by no means neutral, since onlookers saw them as the results of necromancy, often causing the downfall of their inventors.

Art historians discern a type of body-part depiction that revolves around the head but shows slightly more of the body: the bust portrait. For the whole period under consideration it was well known as the profile depiction on coins and medals, being increasingly imitated in non-monetary contexts.¹¹ From the fifteenth century onwards the bust portrait rotated a quarter turn, showing the portrayed *en face* on canvas or in stone. In these representations, the theme of separation is further emphasised by the omission of the rest of the body. This is the case in particular for two types of early modern painting, the 'self-portrait *en décapité*' and the representation of seventeenth-century Dutch burghers with their millstone collars isolating their heads.

⁹ Survey: Arndt H. – Kroos R., "Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel", *Aachener Kunstblätter* 38 (1969) 243–328 and Baert B., *Caput Joannis in Disco. Essay on a Man's Head* (Leiden: 2012).

¹⁰ 'Perch'io parti' così giunte persone, partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!, dal suo principio ch'è in questo troncone. Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso', Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. I. *Inferno*, trans. M. Musa (Harmondsworth: 1984) Canto XXVIII, 139–142, 329.

¹¹ On this: Kohl J. – Müller R. (eds.), *Kopf / Bild. Die Büste in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit (Head / Image. The Bust in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era)* (Munich-Berlin: 2007).

The heads described above were usually portrayed 'cut off' at their throat, or half way down the breast in the case of bust portraits, sometimes shown with a bloody section to emphasise their gruesome origin and make them appear as realistic as possible. These representations are in sharp contrast with the floating neckless heads of Christ, the last category under examination in this book. These are the appearances of Christ on earth known as the *vera icon*. This type always features frontal and symmetrical images of Christ's countenance of the *Acheiropoieton* typus, thus not produced by human beings. Usually they are represented on cloth, showing Christ with parted, sleek hair, a forked beard, and a shining Nimbus or Mandorla.

This book is the result of a two-day conference at the Academia Belgica and the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome on the 'cultural anatomy of disembodied heads' in art, law and penal practices, theology, philosophy, and theoretical as well as practical medicine. We believe this implies that the historical agents in these fields proceeded in mutual interaction, although it is difficult to unravel the exact nature and outcome of their reciprocal impregnation. It is therefore necessary to say something here about the sociocultural background of the entire range of disembodied heads, a phenomenon which gained strength through the Middle Ages. The only exception to this appears to be the cephalophores, because they flourished somewhat earlier, although they enjoyed an enduring popularity. We decided to concentrate on the later Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period because the emphasis on the bodily aspects of culture and religion as well as the fascination with its fragmentation were strongest in these centuries, with a cultural trend towards more intense and vehement emotive expressions becoming apparent.¹² This development is, of course, connected to the desire for human salvation in the most real sense, that is, bodily survival as a complete being, meaning non-partibility and non-passibility. The heads treated in this collection of papers are all connected to the concept of wholeness and thus might be deemed *partes pro toto*.¹³

The works of Samuel Edgerton, Jonathan Sawday, Mitchell Merback and Nicholas Terpstra led us to wonder about a correlation between our topic

¹² See also the support for the chronological demarcation in Cohen E., *The Modulated Scream. Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: 2010) 3–4.

¹³ Caroline Walker Bynum has written on this extensively, see for instance Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, esp. the "Introduction. History in the Comic Mode" 11–26.

and changing social norms concerning the fragmentation of bodies from the later Middle Ages onwards.¹⁴ In his *Pictures and Punishment*, Edgerton begins with the claim that there was a link between artistic achievement and the Florentine system of criminal justice. Some painters depicted severed heads with such anatomical correctness that they must have been frequent visitors, as well as keen observers of, public executions. In the sixteenth century, they might even have participated in dissections. It is assumed that Michelangelo was a member of the Roman Brotherhood of San Giovanni, which handed over the bodies of executed criminals to doctors for the purpose of autopsy.¹⁵ Particularly interesting is Edgerton's claim that the revolutionary realism of Renaissance art helped raise people's sensitivity to the brutality of torture and public execution. At the same time, he remarks that while from the middle of the fifteenth century the number of executions rose, artistic representations were softened. This discussion of Italian practices chimes with an observation made by Mitchell Merback, who asserts that Northern European pictures of the time representing fragmentation tended to create more emotion than those from the south, and were therefore often much more gruesome.¹⁶ On the basis of our collection, this conclusion cannot be drawn unequivocally, as the isolated heads portrayed in Dutch portraiture are as elegant and highly stylised as the *en décapité* portraits of the Italian Renaissance. On the whole, however, one can assert that the proliferation of severed heads with a tendency to greater expressiveness increased, which possibly relates to Counter-Reformation Catholicism and developing Protestantism.

Edgerton's declaration that to 'know the subliminal mind of society one must study the sources of its liturgies for inflicting death upon its members' is telling for the research presented in this volume.¹⁷ The procedures for trials were devised by communal authorities aiming to make

¹⁴ To mention the most important: Edgerton S.Y., *Pictures and Punishment. Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance* (Ithaca: 1985); Sawday J., *The Body Emblazoned. Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: 1995); Merback M., *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel. Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (New York: 1999); Eckstein N.A. – Terpstra N., *Sociability and its Discontents. Civil Society, Social Capital, and their Alternatives in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: 2009), and Terpstra N. (ed.), *The Art of Executing Well. Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy* (Missouri: 2008).

¹⁵ Wisch B., "Incorporating Images: Some Themes and Tasks for Confraternity Studies and Early Modern Visual Culture", in Black C.F. – Gravestock P. (eds.), *Early Modern Confraternities in Europe and the Americas. International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Aldershot: 2006) 246.

¹⁶ Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*.

¹⁷ Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment* 15.

capital punishment understandable and acceptable. It is therefore regrettable that in this volume we lack an in-depth article on decapitation practices in relation to changes in the judicial system and societal criteria for punishment in the Early Modern Period, although Esther Cohen fortunately touches upon these questions in relation to earlier times. Nonetheless, we dare to suggest that there is a connection between the growing fascination with bodily fragments and an increasingly strict judicial system, as well as rising concerns about strife, insurrection and vendettas, as suggested by Guido Ruggiero and Lauro Martines.¹⁸

Following Edgerton, Mitchell Merback speculates that artists were influenced by a guilt culture forged in the Middle Ages and might have been steered in this by contemporary executions. They are understood to have developed the reaction of audiences that witnessed these horrible scenes when later being confronted with pictures of the Crucifixion. In his chapter, 'Pain and Spectacle', Merback refers to Jean Delumeau, who in his *La peur en Occident* (1978) pointed to the persistent connection between death and crime, sin and punishment. This observation concurs with the findings of Esther Cohen, who in her recent book *The Modulated Scream* (2010) decoded the multifarious expressions of passion and pain in the later Middle Ages, reducing them to what scholastics, physicians and preachers thought and did about pain in the period between 1200 and 1500. During these centuries there was a 'culture of pain', with evidence of heightened feelings of compassion and curiosity as well as cruelty pervading all levels of society. The government ordered its judges to become more strict and to apply harsher methods of torture during their inquests, while at the same time the devout inflicted pain upon themselves, drawing their inspiration not only from Christ and the early martyrs but also from the execution spectacles in their towns. It seems inevitable that the witnesses to the disembodied heads we have investigated in this book contemplated their own death as well as their own fate following the Last Judgment. They therefore pertain to the many-voiced culture of suffering that affected all realms of emotional, cultural and scientific production far into the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Lisa Silverman follows a line of reasoning

¹⁸ Ruggiero G., *Violence in Early Renaissance Venice* (New Brunswick N.J.: 1980) and Muir E. – Ruggiero G., *History from Crime* (Baltimore M.D.: 1993) and Martines L. (ed.), *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian cities, 1200–1500* (Berkeley: 1972) and also a later work, Martines L., *Fire in the City. Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence* (New York: 2006).

¹⁹ Cohen, *The Modulated Scream*. This topic is taken further in time in: Dijkhuizen J.F. van – Enenkel K.A.E. (eds.), *The Sense of Suffering. Constructions of Physical Pain in Early*

similar to Cohen in her book *Tortured Subjects. Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France* (2001), concluding that the point of pain was that it forged a path to redemption. She showed how the idea that truth was ensconced in the human body became part of the French legal system.²⁰ All of this concurs with the views of Valentin Groebner, who connects the body with violence and honour, and thus explores what he calls 'Angst-kultur'. Our bodiless heads also seem to be pivotal figures in this culture of fear.²¹

It is striking that the many recent authors on the history of anatomy have not paid any special attention to the topic of disembodied heads. Their interest seems to have been directed towards the human interior, as they assume the anatomists were driven by the urge to lay bare human-kind's hidden secrets. This neglect is strange, as Vesalius' *Fabrica* also contains some fine passages and pictures of severed heads, while one of his fellow students in Paris, the German Johann Dryander, provides even more. The Marburg professor wrote a lavishly illustrated *Anatomia capitis humana* (1536/37), the first significant book on the anatomy of the head based on the author's own dissections. Later he elaborated his views on the human head in more extensive anatomical handbooks. The illustrations in his books show many skulls and skeletons, sometimes even accompanied by the statement 'inevitabile fatum'. Whether as a complete head, a half-dissected specimen, or after a complete dissection had reduced it to a bare and empty skull, all the heads exposed and scrutinised address human mortality. They are poignant symbols of death exploited by early modern anatomists to relate their knowledge to both the historicity of death and the eternal (physical as well as spiritual) life of man.²² The dissected heads and skulls that are depicted and discussed are props, making onlookers evaluate their deeds and if necessary repent their sins in order to safeguard perpetual life. In this respect there is a clear parallel with the above-mentioned use that Renaissance artists made of execution and torture in their pictures, aiming to evoke feelings of penitence.

Modern Culture (Leiden: 2008); on the response of spectators to physical suffering see Carlson M., *Performing Bodies in Pain. Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (New York: 2010).

²⁰ Silverman L., *Tortured Subjects. Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France* (Chicago: 2001).

²¹ For instance: Groebner V., *Defaced. The Visual Culture of Violence in the late Middle Ages*, trans. P. Selwyn (New York: 2004).

²² Crowther K.M., *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation* (London: 2010) 89–95 and 151–155.

This means that the heads we have studied become symbols of human survival and thus humaneness. Hans Baldung Grien's macabre portraits showing beautiful women looking into a mirror that reflects an image of their uncovered skull prove this, as do the Adams and Eves who, in the anatomical handbooks of Vesalius or Dryander, elegantly hold a skull in their hands.²³ Salvation and eternal life are inconceivable, even impossible without heads and skulls. Adam's skull is characteristic for this alpha and omega of humankind. On many paintings we find the typical material remnant of God's first creature at the foot of the Cross on which Jesus hangs. The skull refers to the death of Christ as a prerequisite for safeguarding the eternity of God's other human creatures.

This book does not aim to provide a universal explanation of the medieval and early modern phenomenon of the disembodied head. The editors merely hope to present a new step in the cultural anatomy of the head, addressing the questions of how it was represented, how it was seen and how it was codified/encrypted. Did it function as a *pars pro toto* for a person, or as a separate body part with its own meaning? This entails addressing oppositions such as partitioning versus totality, disintegration versus integration, particularity/individuality versus universality and their respective purports, which touch upon the question of the core of humanity.

Our anthology opens with an important prototype, an isolated head par excellence: Adam's skull. The iconographic motif of the skull at the foot of the Cross is an early medieval symbol of the accomplishment of the Redemption of the human race which set the agenda for the rest of the pre-modern period. However, the literary and semantic background of the theme is obscure. Nonetheless, Marina Montesano provides some clarification with respect to our theme of disembodied heads with her survey of the various textual sources and legends concerning Adam's skull, allowing us to understand and ascertain the reasons for its immense success. Among other issues, she explains the linguistic affinity between skull and cup – the basis for the Eucharistic interpretations of Christ's blood dripping onto Adam's skull found in the later Middle Ages.

Robert Mills' contribution focuses on the High Middle Ages, examining the peculiar phenomenon of talking heads. Disembodied heads literally spoke, but not, it seems, profusely. They did disclose certain prophecies

²³ Koerner J.A., *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Art* (Chicago: 1993) and Crowther, *Adam and Eve* 95–97.

and pieces of wisdom. The story of the talking head has an ancient pedigree; it is by no means simply a manifestation of 'medieval' superstition. Tales of heads that continue to speak following their severing can be found in the myths of almost every ancient culture, with references to prophetic heads being particularly common in Jewish and Arabic traditions. Mills discusses two case studies of skulls that communicate – the legends of Gerbert of Aurillac and Abbo of Fleury (both ca.1000).

Esther Cohen is concerned with the realm of medieval legends and martyrologies, and focuses on the history of pain, penalty and jurisdiction. Obviously, the head (and decapitation) plays a major role in these contexts. While the ancient world was rife with various forms of execution, very few were capital in the sense that they killed people by separating the head from the body. The ancient Germans either hanged their criminals publicly, or dumped them in swamps. In the Greco-Roman tradition, we hear very little about hanging or beheading, which were the most common forms of execution throughout the high medieval and post-medieval periods. At the same time, the term *capitalis sententia*, as a synonym for execution, was common. 'Capital penalty' meant a death sentence. Whether this was due to its primacy among punishments in terms of its severity or to any connection with the head is unclear. Esther Cohen entwines the history of capital punishment within a broader context and concludes that the practice stemmed from twelfth-century ideas in natural philosophy.

In addition to the phenomenon of severed heads that are apparently eloquent, the Middle Ages cherished another related tradition: cephalophory, or saints who carried their own heads. In his article, Scott Montgomery argues that the narrative possibilities of cephalophory are most frequently exploited in the interest of asserting the locus of relic claims. Moreover, individual images of cephalophoric saints may portray the saint with head in hand as an iconographic signifier that references the saint's identity. In these cases, the head portage localises the saint's post-mortem power in his/her bodily relics, but only insofar as it denotes the saint's *passio*.

Barbara Baert starts from a specific image type that occupies a complex position in the iconology of the decapitated head: the *caput Iohannis in disco*, more commonly known as the *Johannesschüssel* (the head of John the Baptist on a plate). The *Johannesschüssel* has a very particular relationship with the material culture of the isolated head in Western Europe. On the one hand, the artefact remained connected to its prototype, the skull relic; on the other, it grew into one of the most important devotional

images of the Middle Ages in both sculpture and painting. In this way, the *Johannesschüssel* channelled the cult of the severed male head into important Christian ideas such as the role of the gaze and empathy in the process of looking, the performative activities of processional images and relics, the archetype of the evil-averting visage, the involvement of the entire *sensorium* in spiritual experience and, finally, the role of the medium in the transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity.

Mateusz Kapustka inquires further into the history of the *Johannesschüssel* with an important case study: the public display of images of St John's head by the municipal authorities of Wrocław (Breslau), a city that at the same time functioned as an episcopal see. In the Wrocław cathedral of St Johannis, relics of John the Baptist had been preserved 'in disco', that is, in a reliquary in the common shape of the so-called *Johannesschüssel*, since at least 1428. The possession of these relics was understood to support the official authority of the Church. However, the same relics were also, to a certain degree, decontextualised in the public space of the city, with the aim of legitimising secular political power. This very special political case involved a metamorphosis of the saint's body into an image, which in turn became a corporeal point of contention in the struggle between two corporate bodies: secular and ecclesiastical.

Arjan De Koomen's contribution leads the transition between the Middle Ages and Early Modernity with a suggestive essay on decapitated heads and self-portraiture. The author discusses images of severed heads in Renaissance and Baroque works of art that, since Erwin Panofsky, have been accepted as depictions of the artist himself. In all cases these self-portraits appear in a story of decapitation, in the guise of a victim of the sword. De Koomen presents arguments that revise the phenomenon of the 'self-portrait *en décapité*' by elaborating on the modern paradigm of artistic self-insertion. He concludes that the phenomenon can better be described as the artist's token of professional pride, since it implicitly or explicitly functions as an artistic signature.

Jetze Touber undertakes a study of head relics in Counter-Reformation Rome (1570 to 1630). In these decades the predecessors of the Bollandists took stock of which relics were venerated under whose name. The inventory of relics in this period became more complete and articulated. As heads of martyrs and confessors were observed, details were noted that either supported or problematised the historical claims for which the Counter-Reformation Church required satisfactory proof. In particular, claims on the part of different ecclesiastical institutions to possess the head of one and the same martyr invited close scrutiny – perhaps more

so than in the case of other body parts. The head possessed distinctive features that were crucial for verifying its authenticity. Certain characteristics could, for example, serve as indications of age, which could be compared with the hagiographical documentation.

Bert Watteeuw's contribution provides an original interpretation of the concept of disembodied heads, focusing on the remarkable Dutch neckwear worn by early-modern sitters for portraits. He argues that the ruff not only visualises the archetype of the severed head, but truly and paradoxically embodies it by dividing and ruling the living, breathing bodies. Ruffs were not merely passive tokens of status but active informers of standing that were closely interwoven with ideas about purity, danger and gender. They marked borders between social classes and literal borders on the body in a porous and highly ambiguous way, with the complex relationship between the presentation and representation of the body highlighted by them. The ruff exemplified the strangling hold of the idea of the severed head, not just on human imagery but on human bodies themselves.

Catrien Santing closes the discussion of disembodied heads by opening and confronting it with a theme that rivals the head: the human heart. The so-called battle of the head and the heart is analysed against the backdrop of transitions occurring between the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The author explains in more detail why, for religious and philosophical reasons, the heart became more popular during a time in which its medical secrets were slowly but surely being revealed. Apart from other factors, such as the so-called 'renaissance of Aristotelianism' in the sixteenth century, the heart's quasi-equation with the soul was what made it so resistant to downgrading. Cardiac saints obstructed the cultic triumph of the head far into the eighteenth century, and even then successfully managed to pass on their task to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in which all other heart devotions merged.

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ADAM'S SKULL

Marina Montesano

*And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull [...]*¹

*They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of the skull).*²

*When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there.*³

*So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha).*⁴

The motif of Adam's skull at the foot of the Cross as a symbol of the accomplishment of the Redemption of the human race has an indirect origin in the writings of the four Evangelists, all of whom were consistent in saying that the place where Christ was brought for crucifixion was known as 'skull': *Golghota* in Hebrew, *locus Calvariae* in Latin. My paper has two aims: firstly, to understand how, and on what textual grounds, the legend of Adam's skull as we know it from late medieval iconography was created; and secondly, to try to ascertain the possible reasons for its success.

The first written source to link Calvary to Adam is Origen's *Commentary on St. Matthew*. He writes that the Jews transmitted the information that Adam's body was buried under the Calvary because 'For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive' (1 *Corinthians* 15: 22).⁵ As Origen mentions a Hebrew tradition, it is worth trying to determine what sources he may have had in mind. There are no known written texts from which he might have taken this legend, presuming of course that his knowledge did not come from oral sources. Nonetheless, a series of apocryphal texts dating to between the fourth and fifth centuries offer some indication of

¹ 'Et venerunt in locum qui dicitur Golghota quod est Calvariae locus' (*Matthew* 27: 33).

² 'Et perducunt illum in Golghota locum quod est interpretatum Calvariae locum' (*Mark* 15: 22).

³ 'Et postquam venerunt in locum qui vocatur Calvariae ibi crucifixerunt eum' (*Luke* 23: 33).

⁴ 'Susceperunt autem Iesum et eduxerunt et baiulans sibi crucem exivit in eum qui dicitur Calvariae locum hebraice Golghota ubi eum crucifixerunt' (*John* 19: 16–18).

⁵ Origen, *In Matthew*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. XIII (Paris: 1857–1866) 1777.

the environment that might have produced this piece of information. I am referring here to the various texts that describe the life of Adam and Eve after they were expelled from Paradise. The most useful for our purpose is the Syriac book known as *Me'ârath Gazzê*, 'The Cave of Treasures'. It is attributed to Ephrem Syrus, a fourth-century author, even though the version we have is probably not the original, but a later one from the sixth century.⁶ It relates how, at the age of 930, Adam, sensing that death was approaching, asked his son Seth to place him in the so-called cave of treasures, and to embalm him with myrrh, cassia and stacte (or nataph: a kind of resin) – three substances with both Biblical and Egyptian resonances that were used to embalm bodies. At any rate, all three substances are from the East, and Pliny and his Greek sources list them among the exotic trees.⁷

Adam demands that later generations of kin, when moving from the place where they had been living, should take his body with them and place him at the centre of the earth, because it is there that he and his sons and daughters would be redeemed:

And the departure of Adam from this world took place in the nine hundred and thirtieth year – according to the reckoning from the beginning – on the fourteenth day of the moon, on the sixth day of the month of Nisân [April], at the ninth hour, on the day of the Eve of the Sabbath [i.e., Friday]. At the same hour in which the Son of Man delivered up his soul to His Father on the Cross, did our father Adam deliver up his soul to Him that fashioned him; and he departed from this world.⁸

Later on we read more of a parallel between the final events in the life of Christ and Adam's life:

Know also that Christ was like unto Adam in everything, even as it is written. In that very place where Melchisedek ministered as a priest, and where Abraham offered up his son Isaac as an offering, the wood of the Cross was set up, and that self-same place is the centre of the earth, and there the Four Quarters of the earth meet each other. For when God made the earth His mighty power was running before it, and the earth was running after it,

⁶ *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, ed. E.A. Wallis (London: 1927); for the edition of the original text, see *Die Schatzhöhle, Me'arath Gazze. Eine Sammlung biblischer Geschichten, ehemals Ephraem Syrus zugeschrieben. Syrisch, arabisch und deutsch*, ed. C. von Bezold (Leipzig: 1883–1888, n. ed. 1981).

⁷ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XII, 33–35; he also adds: 'Nililque eius rei causa in Italia victrix omnium, in Europa vero tota praeter irim Illyricam et nardum Gallicum gignitur'; ibidem, XIII, 2.

⁸ *The Book of the Cave* 72.

and the power of God stood still and became motionless in Golgotha; and that same place formeth the boundary of the earth. When Shem took up the body of Adam, that same place, which is the door of the earth, opened itself. And when Shem and Melchisedek had deposited the body of Adam in the centre of the earth the Four Quarters of the earth closed in about it, and embraced Adam, and straightway that opening was closed firmly, and all the children of Adam were not able to open it. And when the Cross of Christ, the Redeemer of Adam and his sons, was set up upon it, the door of that place was opened in the face of Adam. And when the Wood [i.e., the Cross] was fixed upon it, and Christ was smitten with the spear, and blood and water flowed down from His side, they ran down into the mouth of Adam, and they became a baptism to him, and he was baptized.⁹

Another text more or less contemporary to the *Me'ârath Gazzê*, the *Life of Adam and Eve*, contains similar prophecies revealed to Adam about the coming of Christ as the redeemer of the human race and of Adam himself. To make his death more reminiscent of the birth of Christ, he is no longer embalmed with myrrh, cassia and stacte, but with myrrh, frankincense, and gold. The story of his *translatio*, on the other hand, is almost identical to that of the *Me'ârath Gazzê*.¹⁰

As both these writings were redacted at a later date than Origen's *Commentary on St. Matthew*, but could be re-workings of earlier texts or collections of oral traditions, two hypotheses can be advanced about their genesis: the first is that Origen himself could be the source of the belief, drawing inspiration from the first Epistle to the Corinthians, which he quotes ('For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive'),¹¹ and also from the common exegesis of many parts of the Old Testament (especially *Isaiah*), interpreted as prophecies of the New Testament. The theme of Adam as a figuration of Christ must have been fairly widespread among Christian communities of the first centuries. Although the life of these communities remains quite obscure to us, they formed the background for the writing of a peculiar book from the third century, the so-called *Testamentum Salomonis*, which describes the power of Solomon to summon up demons, assembling elements from Greek mythology, Persian tradition and the *Haggada*.¹² In the text there is a reference to 'Jerusalem

⁹ Ibidem 224–225.

¹⁰ *Apocalisse di Mosè e Vita di Adamo e Eva*, in *Apocrifi dell'Antico Testamento*, ed. P. Sacchi (Turin: 1996) vol. II, 379–471. See also Jonge M. de – Tromp J., *The Life of Adam and Eve and Related Literature* (Sheffield: 1997).

¹¹ 'Et sicut in Adam omnes moriuntur ita et in Christo omnes vivificabuntur' (1 *Corinthians* 15: 22).

¹² *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, ed. H.F.D. Sparks (Oxford: 1984) 733–752.

being signified in writing, unto the place called “of the head”. For there is fore-appointed the angel of the great counsel, and now he will openly dwell on the cross’.¹³ The *Testamentum Salomonis* brings us to the second hypothesis, which I regard as more plausible, namely that Origen might have taken his story from Christian Jewish communities who devised an alternative legend to the standard Hebraic version which says Adam was buried in Hebron.¹⁴ Other later texts seem to confirm this hypothesis.

Eusebius of Caesarea writes in his *Onomasticon*: ‘Arboc. In our codex written corruptly as Arboc, Arbo is the reading in the Hebrew. That means “four” since this is where the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob along with the “great Adam” are buried. So in the *Book of Josue*, even if some suppose he was buried at the Calvary.’¹⁵ Saint Ambrose knew the legend of Adam’s sepulchre under the Cross and did not reject it. He briefly writes about it in one of his *Epistles to Horontianus*: ‘Upon Golgotha was the sepulchre of Adam; that Christ by His Cross might raise him from death. Thus where in Adam was the death of all, there in Christ was the resurrection of all’.¹⁶

Around the turn of the fifth century there are two noteworthy testimonies of the progression of this legend: the first comes from Saint Jerome, the second from the *Carmen adversus marcionitas* of Pseudo-Tertullian. In one of his Epistles, Saint Jerome writes: ‘Tradition has it that in this city, nay, more, on this very spot, Adam lived and died. The place where our Lord was crucified is called Calvary, because the skull of the primitive man was buried there. So it came to pass that the second Adam, that is

¹³ ‘[...] Praesignificata Jerusalem, in loco qui dicitur Cephalaeum: ibi enim praedestinatus est Angelus magni consilii, et olim aperte super lignum manebit’, see *Testamentum Salomonis*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. CXXII (Paris: 1857–1866) 1334; *The Testament of Solomon the King*, trans. F.C. Conybeare (reprint Arkham – Rockport – Brookline: 2002) 15.

¹⁴ On the location, see Horst P.W. van der, “The Site of Adam’s Tomb”, in Baasten M.F.J. – Munk R. (eds.), *Studies in Hebrew Literature and Jewish Culture. Presented to Albert van der Heide on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Dordrecht: 2007) 251–255.

¹⁵ ‘Arboc corrupte in nostris codicibus scribitur, cum in hebraeis legatur arbe, id est quattuor, eo quod ibi tres patriarchae Abraam, Isaac et Iacob sepulti sunt, et Adam magnus, ut in Iesu libro scriptum est, licet eum quidam conditum in loco Calvariae suspicentur’, Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 6, 8–12. Jerome’s Latin translation: Hieronymus, *Liber de Situ et Nominibus Locorum Hebraicorum*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. XXIII (Paris: 1844–1855) 862.

¹⁶ ‘Ibi Adae sepulcrum; ut illum mortuum in sua cruce resuscitaret. Ubi ergo in Adam mors omnium, ibi in Christo omnium resurrectio.’ Ambrosius, *Epistolae Secunda Classis*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. XVI (Paris: 1844–1855) 1243.

the blood of Christ, as it dropped from the cross, washed away the sins of the buried protoplast'.¹⁷ Pseudo-Tertullian is even clearer:

The new gifts of the font: this is the Church, true mother of a living people; flesh new from Christ's flesh, and from His bones a bone. A spot there is called Golgotha – of old the fathers' earlier tongue thus called its name – "the skull-pan of a head": here is earth's midst; here victory's sign; here, have our elders taught, there was a great head found; here the first man, we have been taught, was buried; here the Christ suffers; with sacred blood the earth grows moist. That the old Adam's dust may able be, commingled with Christ's blood, to be upraised by dripping water's virtue.¹⁸

In this text, Golgotha is defined as the *umbilicus mundi*, the centre of the world – as we found in the *Me'ârath Gazzê* – and we know the idea of Jerusalem as the *omphalos* is Jewish, probably dating back to Hellenic times. Pseudo-Tertullian also says that the blood of Christ drops to vivify Adam's dust, and that our ancestors taught how, in that place, a large skull had been found; it is also interesting that the author writes 'os magnum', where *os* has the double meaning of 'face' and 'mouth', so the Cross may be planted both in Adam's head or in his mouth: another parallel linking it to the *Me'ârath Gazzê*, something I will return to shortly.

There is one further document which clearly points in the direction of a Jewish-Christian origin for this legend: it comes from a Greek author, Basil of Seleucia, who lived in the first half of the fifth century. He recalls the story of Adam's skull being buried under Calvary, but rejects it as a Jewish tradition. He also exhibits knowledge of the *Testamentum Salomonis*, or similar writings.¹⁹ As with Basil, later texts dealing with this subject do not always assume it is true. In his *Sic et non*, for instance, Abelard asks

¹⁷ 'In hac urbe, imo in hoc tunc loco, et habitasse dicitur, et mortuus esse Adam. Unde et locus in quo crucifixus est Dominus noster, *Calvaria* appellatur, scilicet quod ibi sit antiqui hominis calvaria condita, ut secundus Adam, id est sanguis Christi de cruce stillans, primi Adam et jacentis protoplasti peccata dilueret', Hieronymus, *Paulae et Eustochii ad Marcel-lam. De sanctis locis in Epistolae Secundum Ordinem Temporum Distributae*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. XXII (Paris: 1844–1845) 485.

¹⁸ 'Haec populi vera est viventis ecclesia mater, de Christi nova carne caro deque ossi-bus ossum. Golgotha locus est, capitis calvaria quondam; / lingua paterna prior sic illum nomine dixit; / hic medium terrae est, hic est victoriae signum. / os magnum hic veteres nostri docuere repertum, / hic hominem primum suscepimus esse sepultum, / hic patitur Christus, pio sanguine terra madescit, / pulvis Adae ut possit veteris cum sanguine Christi / commixtus stillantis aquae virtute levare.' Tertullianus, "Carmen adversus Marcionitas", in Pollmann K. (ed.), *Das Carmen Adversus Marcionitas: Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Göttingen: 1991) 80.

¹⁹ Basilus Seleuciensis, *Oratio*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. LXXXV (Paris: 1857–1866) 409–410.

'quod Adam in loco Calvariae sepultus sit et contra', citing Ambrose and Jerome as favourable, and listing among others Isidore of Seville, who accepts Hebron as Adam's sepulchre.²⁰

This means that both versions of the story circulated in the Late Ancient World. However, if we look at the iconography, it is fairly evident that the sepulchre symbolised by Adam's skull under the Cross was about to experience a major change in fortune. Having established what background produced it, we can now try to understand how and when this version of the story, in migrating from East to West, became so relevant. Around AD 130–135, with the foundation of the Roman town of Aelia, Emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of a *Capitolium* on the site that was later considered to be Golgotha. Before the *Capitolium*, there had been a huge temple dedicated to Venus on the site. As the memory of the place where Jesus Christ had been buried faded away after the destruction of old Jerusalem in AD 70, Eusebius of Caesarea states that in his times (the beginning of the fourth century) Calvary was identified as a spot on the northern slopes of Mount Zion.²¹

When Emperor Constantine the Great and his mother destroyed the pagan temples in an attempt to uncover what they thought was Jesus Christ's Jerusalem, nobody mentioned Adam's sepulchre; some say the reason might lie in the fact that the architects employed by Constantine

²⁰ 'Ex libro Sapientiae (IX, 19): Per sapientiam sanati sunt quicunque tibi placuerunt, Domine, a principio. Haec illum, qui primus factus est a Deo pater orbis terrarum, cum solus esset creatus, custodivit et eduxit illum a delicto suo; et dedit illi virtutem continendi omnia. *August. in epist. ad Evodium de verbis Petri, quibus Christum asserit solvisse inferni dolores*: Quis ergo nisi infidelis negaverit fuisse apud inferos Christum? *Item*: Cur voluerit venire ubi dolores essent? Quia erat, ut scriptum est, *inter mortuos liber* (Psal. LXXXVII, 6), ubi princeps mortis non invenit, quod supplicio deberetur. *Item*: Et de illo quidem primo homine, quod eum ibidem solverit, Ecclesia fere tota consentit; quod eam non inaniter credidisse credendum est, undecunque hoc traditum sit, quanquam illud quod in libro Sapientiae scriptum est (X, 1): *Haec illum, qui primus factus est pater orbis terrarum, cum solus esset creatus, custodivit, et eduxit illum de peccato suo*, magis facere pro hac sententia videatur. *Item De baptismo parvulorum lib. II de Adam et Eva*: Sicut illi ergo primi homines postea juste vivendo tamen merito creduntur per Domini sanguinem ab aeterno supplicio liberati. Adam primus hominum peccavit, Abel primus juste vixit. *Hilarius in psalmo XIV*: Denique Adam confessus veniae reservatus et glorificatus in Christo est. *Gregor. Eulogio episcopo Alexandrino et Anastasio Antiocheno*: Primum hominem, qua die peccavit, anima mortuum dicimus; qui tamen Adam postmodum per poenitentiam ad vitam rediit. *Augustinus De singularitate clericorum*: Dico autem vobis, tolerabilius erit Adae in die iudicii quam vobis.' Petrus Abaelardus, *Sic et non*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. CLXXVIII (Paris: 1885) 1426–1427.

²¹ Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 74, 19–21: Hieronymus *Liber de Situ* 903; for a commentary see Alliata E., *Topografia cristiana della Palestina* (Jerusalem: 2000) 88.

were not from Palestine, but were mainly Greek. In any case, none of the pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land in those days mention Adam's sepulchre. Egeria, who wrote between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, makes a clear distinction between the *Anastasis*, the Church of the Resurrection, and the *Martyrium*, the main church, built over Golgotha, right behind the Cross, but without any mention of Adam.²²

The only exception is the so-called *Breviarius Ierosolimitanus*, written around 530, where there is a mention of the place 'ubi plasmatus est Adam', and where, apart from the Crucifixion, Isaac's sacrifice, David's anointment and the construction of the Temple were all supposed to have taken place. Clearly emerging in this source (and progressively in many others) is a combination of Jewish traditions relating to Mount Moria, identified today as the Haram Es Sharif, and the topography of the Holy Sepulchre, where many places mentioned in the Old and the New Testament are all brought together, in line with the notion that it was the centre of the world.²³

The destruction wrought by the Persian raid in 614 and the Arab occupation in 638 led to a complete reconstruction, as witnessed by Arculf, a pilgrim who, in 670, dictated his tale to the Irish Abbott Adamnan, and also supplied drawings of the plan and the places of worship inside the Basilica. In this testimony, as in those by Saint Willibald (723–726) and Bernardus Monachus (870), there are no references to a location identified as Adam's burial place. The first person to create a link of sorts was the monk Epifanius in the ninth century, who wrote: 'close to the shrine you find the Calvary [...] Under the place where the cross was fixed, there is the church and Adam's tumulus' ('Ekklesia tou Adám, kai Adám o táfos').²⁴ Excavations undertaken in the chapel presently dedicated to Adam have revealed that the materials used are both different to and of a later date than the post-614 reorganisation (though what we can see today is in all likelihood more recent than Epifanius' tale and probably associated with the restoration of the area ordered by Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos). To him we owe the setting described by pilgrims of later ages, who unanimously mention a cleft showing the rock under it, the same that can be seen today.

²² Egeria, *Pellegrinaggio in Terra Santa*, ed. N. Natalucci (Florence: 1991) 186–187.

²³ See Baldi D., *Enchiridion locorum sanctorum* (Jerusalem: 1982) 617–705.

²⁴ Baldi, *Enchiridion locorum sanctorum* 648–649.

Just after Jerusalem's capture by the Christian army, two testimonies offer us a clear idea of the situation. Seawulf described Calvary in 1102–1103, stating that there was a place under it called Golgotha, where Adam was saved through Jesus' blood dripping on him (but he also adds that, according to Saint Augustine, Adam's shrine was in Hebron).²⁵ Daniel, a Russian *igoumenos* who visited the Holy Land in 1106–1107, described the *Umbilicus mundi*, the centre of the earth, and, not far away, a rock with a cleft in the top where the cross has been fixed: 'Down under that rock lies Adam's head, [the] first man created. When that rock split on Adam's head, through that rift poured blood and water from Our Lord's chest on Adam's head and it washed all the sins of the human race. This rift is on that rock and until now we can recognise this venerable sign on the right hand side of Our Lord's'.²⁶

It is interesting to note how the terminology was rather unclear to pilgrims of the time, who struggled to distinguish Calvary from Golgotha. Seawulf creates further confusion by calling Calvary the area of crucifixion and Golgotha Adam's chapel, while Daniel says that the upper area 'where the crucifixion is' is Golgotha, while the lower area is called 'the place of the Cranium, that is the place of the skull'.²⁷ By this time, however, the tradition had acquired its almost fixed form, and ever-increasing dealings between Europe and the Holy Land would spread and consolidate it throughout the Mediterranean.

Iconographic research supports this chronology. The earliest representations of Adam's skull under the cross seem to have undergone the same period of gestation as the pilgrims' tales. The first known example is a bronze crucifix, now in Providence, R.I., initially attributed to the sixth century, but probably dating from the eighth to ninth centuries. The skull is barely visible, but on both sides of the base there is an inscription in Greek that reads 'topos kravion'. Other examples can be traced back to the tenth century onwards, becoming more frequent at the beginning of the new millennium, thus following the chronological sequence already found in the written testimony.²⁸

²⁵ 'Subtus est locus qui vocatur Golgotha, ubi Adam a torrente Dominici cruoris super eum delapso dicitur esse a mortuis resuscitates.' Baldi, *Enchiridion locorum sanctorum* 655–656.

²⁶ Daniil Egumeno, *Itinerario in Terra Santa*, ed. M. Garzaniti (Rome: 1991) 87.

²⁷ Daniil Egumeno, *Itinerario in Terra Santa* 88.

²⁸ Bagatti B., "Notes on the Iconography of Adam under Calvary", *Liber Annuus* 27 (1977) 5–32. See also Frazer M.E., "Hades Stabbed by the Cross of Christ", *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 9 (1974) 153–161.

At this point, it should be added that the story of Adam's skull is interwoven with the legend of the Wood of the Cross, the wood of the tree 'in quo peccavit Adam', as Jacobus de Voragine wrote. In his *Legenda aurea*, Jacobus relates this story when he talks about the invention of the Cross, but in his tale of the Passion he denies any authenticity to the tradition according to which Adam's skull was buried at the foot of Golgotha: 'For right in the place where Jesus Christ suffered death, it is said that Adam was buried. However, this is not authentic, for Saint Jerome said that Adam was buried in Hebron'.²⁹ Probably following Petrus Comestor, Jacobus comments that 'a great stench could be smelt on the Mount of Calvary, where dead bodies were left to rot. It is said in the *Scholastica Historia* that "calvary" means the bare human skull. And because many were beheaded there, and many skulls were scattered around in open view, it was called the place of Calvary'.³⁰ Here Jacobus is wrong: beheadings were never carried out on Mount Calvary, but it is probably from this twofold tradition, that is, from the coexistence of the idea of Adam's skull at the foot of the cross and that of Mount Calvary as a place of beheadings, that a certain iconic representation originates. For example, in the *Crucifixion* in the polyptych of the San Zeno Altarpiece by Andrea Mantegna, the ossuary can be seen in the bottom left of the painting, while Adam's skull is, as usual, at the foot of the cross, receiving the blood pouring from Christ's chest (Fig. 1).

Let's now return to Adam's skull. While the chronology of this motif is clear enough, how did a legend that was at first so obscure, ignored and even opposed, later become so successful? In our view, the symbolism of the cranium and the references to this legend that can be traced in many different sources and traditions, were reason enough to make it popular.

Many centuries earlier, Titus Livy described a very strange discovery that took place in the early days of Rome: 'Here is the Capitol, where, a human head being found, it was foretold that in that place would be the head of the world, and the chief seat of empire'.³¹ According to Livy,

²⁹ 'Ubi Christus passus est et Adam dicitur fuisse sepultus, licet autenticum non sit, cum secundum Ieronimum Adam in Hebron sepultus fuerit', Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. G.P. Maggioni (Florence: 1998) 345.

³⁰ 'Ubi erant corpora fetida mortuorum. Unde dicitur in historiis quod calvaria proprie est os capitis humani nudum; et quia ibi decollabantur rei et multa ossa capitum ibi aspersa erant, dicebatur calvarie locus vel calvariarum', Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea* 340.

³¹ 'Hic Capitolium est, ubi quondam capite humano invento responsum est eo loco caput rerum summamque imperii fore', Livy, *Ab Urbe condita* V, 54.

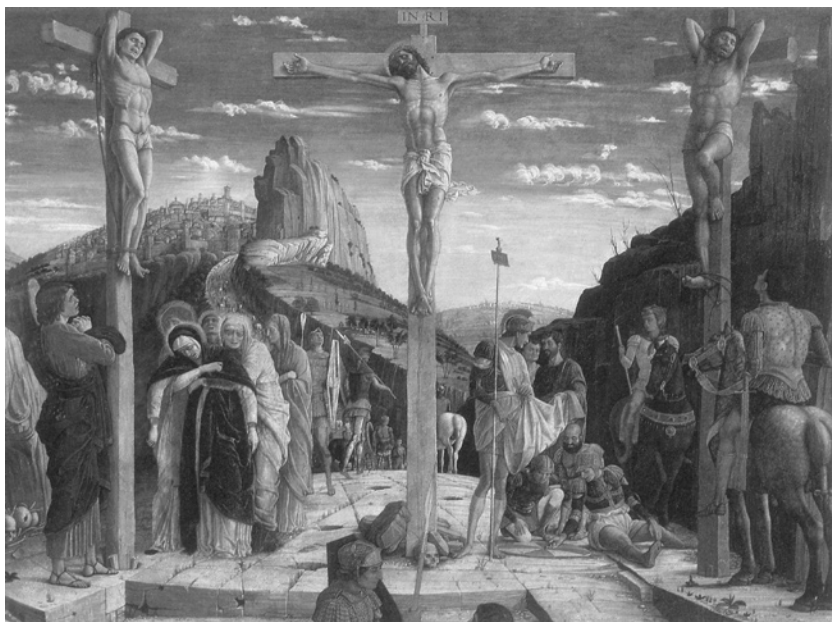


Fig. 1. Andrea Mantegna, *Crucifixion*, San Zeno Altarpiece, predella (1457–1459). Paris, Musée du Louvre. Image © Musée du Louvre.

Capitolium comes from *caput*, the same etymology as Calvary. Following a reverse path, the Calvary where the relics of the Passion were found and where the Holy Sepulchre would stand, became, after AD 130, *Capitolium*, and both the *Capitolium* and the Holy Sepulchre are presented as *omphaloi*. While Livy's *First Decade*, in particular Book Five, can be found in manuscripts dating from the fourth-fifth centuries (the oldest we know of, in fact), a contamination can be excluded. It is more likely to be a typological similarity, prompting us to take other parallels into account – themes such as the vaticinating head or the head buried inside a mountain can be found in literature from the Late Ancient World onwards. Brief mention can be made of the *Life of Saint Macarius*, one of the Desert Fathers, which is part of the *Vitae Patrum* and is also related by Jacobus de Voragine. Saint Macarius finds a dead man's head and asks it to whom it belonged. The head explains that it belonged to a heathen [man]. Hearing this, Macarius asks it about those condemned to hell.³² In Snorri's *Ynglingarsaga*, the head of Mimir the Wise is sent to Odin, who rubs it

³² Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda* 122–123.

with herbal ointments, sings enchantments and gives it the magical power to reveal hidden things to him.³³

A few words need to be said about an interesting cluster of legends regarding the Gulf of Antalya. The tale is widely known, and was first related by Walter Map, subsequently by Benedict of Peterborough and Gervase of Tilbury, then in thirteenth-century Arthurian literature, and finally in John Mandeville's *Travels*.³⁴ It tells the story of the carnal union between a man and the dead body of the woman he was in love with, but could never possess when she was alive. This union spawned a monstrous creature, a head with magical powers (which sometimes petrifies those who stare at it). At the end of the story, it is thrown into the sea, where it provokes violent sea storms. Both Walter Map and Gervase of Tilbury link this legend to that of the Gorgon beheaded by Perseus, perhaps not entirely without foundation. Harf-Lancner and Polino have studied the story, concluding that it is of Anatolian origin, from where Western pilgrims and fighters in the Holy Land might have brought it home.³⁵ For his part, Alberto Varvaro has analysed the extent to which this motif has permeated thirteenth-century French literature, where the links to the original story of the monstrous head are missing, but those to a *gouffre de Satanie* are maintained. *Satanie*, with an obvious allusion to the devil, replaces Satalia,³⁶ which is the name given by crusader chronicles to Antalya.³⁷ Also, *gouffre* – abyss, as well as vortex (Italian retains the same meaning for the word *gorgo*) – takes the place of *golfe*, 'gulf'; the sea vortex of Satalia becomes the very name of an enchanted place, once again evoking the Gorgon's head.

³³ *Storie e leggende del nord*, ed. G. Chiesa Isnardi (Milan: 1977) 84–85; see also the *carmen Völuspá*, in *Il canzoniere eddico*, ed. P. Scardigli (Milan: 1982) 12.

³⁴ Walter Map, *Svaghi di corte*, ed. F. Latella (Parma: 1990) vol. II, 502–509; for the English edition, see Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. M.R. James – C.N.L. Brooke – R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: 1983); Benedictus Abbas, *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi*, in *Rerum Britannicarum Scriptores*, vol. II, ed. W. Stubbs (London: 1867) 195–196; Gervasius Tilleberiensis, *Otia imperialia*, in *Scriptores rerum Brunsvicensium*, ed. G.W. Leibniz (Hannover: 1707) vol. I, 920; *Livre d'Artus. The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, ed. H.O. Sommer (Washington: 1909–1913); Jean de Mandeville, *Voyage autour de la terre*, ed. C. Deluz (Paris: 1993) 21.

³⁵ Harf-Lancner L. – Polino M.N., "Le gouffre de Satalie. Survivances médiévales du mythe de Meduse", *Le Moyen Âge* 94 (1988) 71–101.

³⁶ Varvaro A., *Apparizioni fantastiche. Tradizioni folcloriche e letteratura nel medioevo* (Bologna: 1994) 138–156.

³⁷ 'Attalicus dicitur, qui vulgari appellatione gulphus Sataliae noncupatur', Willermus Tyrensis Archiepiscopus, *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, in *Recueil des historiens des croisades. Historiens occidentaux* (Paris: 1844) vol. I, 751.

This digression is not without purpose, as Adam's skull is itself a prophesying head of sorts – as mentioned in relation to the apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve*, all the acts of Adam are a prefiguration of the Passion of Christ and the Redemption. This explains why some of the writings I have mentioned speak of the Cross having been erected not upon the head, but upon Adam's face, with the blood pouring into his mouth. There is an interesting drawing by Saint Francis for Brother Leo, in which a Tau cross emerges from Adam's mouth (or face).³⁸ Adam's skull is prophesying because growing out of his mouth is the *Verbum Dei*, Christ himself. There is a clear reference to Isaiah, to 'a rod out of the root of Jesse' but above all to 'he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth'.³⁹

Before concluding, I would like to introduce another evolution of the motif of Adam's skull at the foot of the Cross, where the head is replaced by a cup held by a man, as shown in a thirteenth-century French illuminated work (Fig. 2), and in the Wechselburg Cross of the same period. Here again, examination of the symbols involved can prove helpful: the skull and the cup are closely linked to each other, to the point of being interchangeable. The ancient and medieval literary traditions are rich in skulls transformed into cups. Herodotus tells us that the Issedones used to scalp and remove the flesh of the dead *pater familias*, to paint the skull in gold and keep it as an object of reverence;⁴⁰ Livy relates how the Cisalpine Gauls, who triumphed over the Romans in 216 BC, took the head of the Consul Postumius and turned it into a sacred cup for a ceremony;⁴¹ this is not very different from the well-known story of the Lombard Alboin who, as Paulus Diaconus writes, had the king of the Gepids' head cut off and turned into a cup to offer to the king's daughter, who incidentally was also his wife.⁴² Even more striking is the *Peredur*, an early variation on Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, where the author replaces the Holy Grail with a head brought in in procession.⁴³

³⁸ 'Beatus Franciscus scripsit manu sua istam benedictionem mihi fratri Leoni. Et simili modo fecit istud signum Thau cum capite manu sua', Boccali I., *Concordantiae verbalis opusculorum S. Francisci et S. Clarae Assisensium* (Assisi: 1976) 131. The image is reproduced in Bagatti, "Notes on the Iconography".

³⁹ 'Virga de radice Iesse' and 'et percutiet terram virga oris suivirga oris sui', *Isaiah* 11: 1; 11: 4.

⁴⁰ Herodotus, *Historiae* IV, 26, 2.

⁴¹ Livy, *Ab Urbe condita* XXIII, 24; see also X, 26.

⁴² Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum* 27.

⁴³ *Historia Peredur vab Efwrawc*, ed. G.W. Goetinck (Cardiff: 1976).

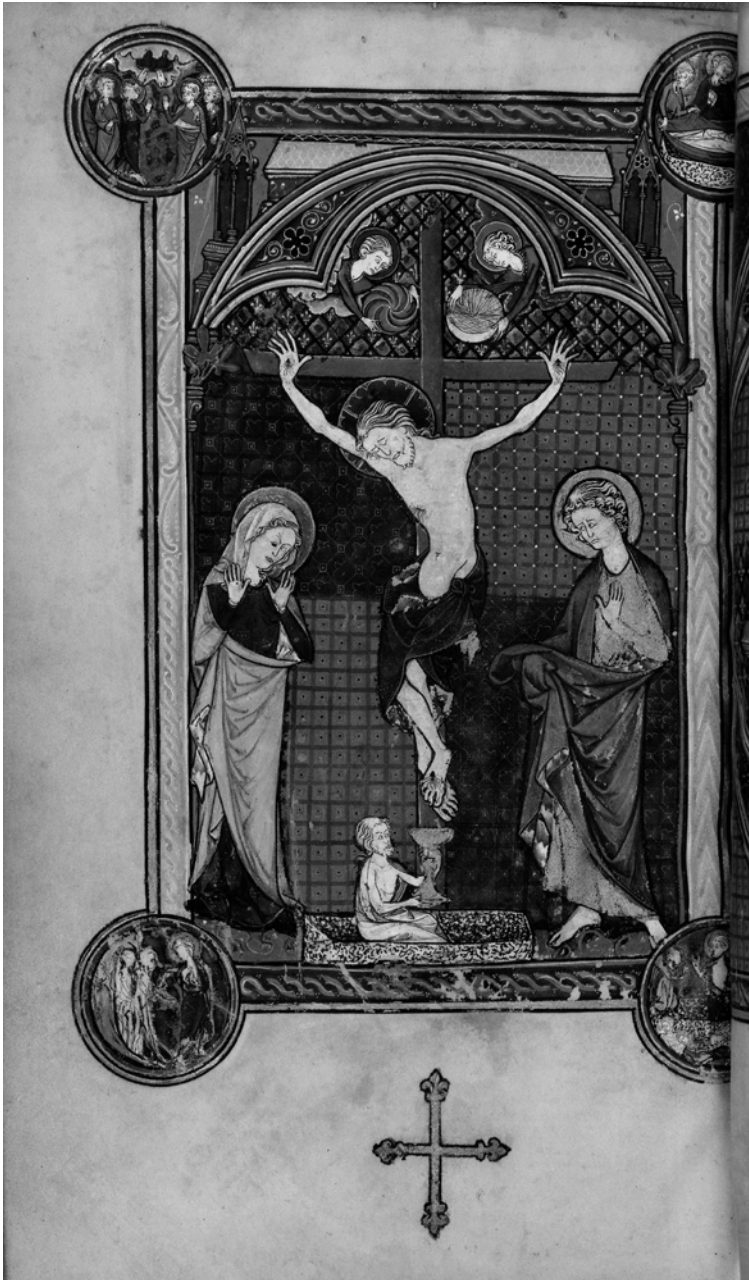


Fig. 2. Crucifixion, avec Adam recueillant le sang du Christ, miniature in Missel de Saint-Denis (1270?–1275?). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscrits occidentaux, fol. 209v. Image © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

The root of this identification between the skull and the cup is not only explicable in functional terms. There is something more profound, as the common etymology shows. According to some, the remote origin of the Latin *Caput-itis* lies in the Akkadian *Kabtu*, which shares the same root as *Qabutu*, then *Kuppu*, meaning 'cup'. These are the same words that become the Medieval Latin *cuppa*, then the modern English *cup*. Even more interesting is the Latin word *Testa-ae*, probably from the Akkadian *Tiddum*, but also *Tissum*, meaning 'brick' or 'tile', or 'vase', but also 'shell' or 'cranium', as in the modern Italian 'testa'. In High German, *Koph* means both 'cup' and 'skull', giving way to modern *Kopf*. This comes from the proto-Indo-European *Kap*, which also yields the English *keep*, or *capio* in Latin, translatable both as 'to keep' and 'to understand'.⁴⁴ This brief and I hope not unhelpful linguistic digression adds a small detail to the legend of Adam's skull, which, as we have seen, was effectively perceived as a receptacle for Christ's blood. Bearing this in mind, the iconography of Adam lying with the cup in his hand seems to go back to the very same origin, the very same meaning of the whole story.

⁴⁴ Semerano G., *Le origini della cultura europea. Basi semitiche delle lingue indoeuropee. Dizionari etimologici*, 2 vols. (Florence: 1994).

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TALKING HEADS, OR, A TALE OF TWO CLERICS

Robert Mills

It has become a cliché of academic research on severed heads that they ‘say different things in different cultures’.¹ But what happens when disembodied heads literally speak? My analysis of the phenomenon of talking heads begins with an evocation of two narratives that developed in the decades around 1000. One head communicates a message about truth and beauty; the other sets out, through its speech, deliberately to deceive. Both tales convey a sense of the multivocality of detached heads in medieval cultures. Heads that in one context speak the truth, projecting manifestations of the sublime, can in other settings be connected with all that is abject and evil in the world – at least, in the minds of their medieval Christian audiences. Talking heads may aspire to the very heights of Christian piety, but they also bring their beholders face to face with a deadly force, whether it be the empty worship associated with pagan idolatry or the impoverishment of classical and Arabic learning. Talking heads are monsters, not only by virtue of their disturbing hybridity, but also in the premodern sense of *monstra*, marvels or portents – things bespeaking wonder as well as fear.

The story of the talking head has an ancient pedigree; it is by no means simply a manifestation of ‘medieval’ superstition. Aristotle, in *De partibus animalium*, asks whether severed heads can speak, but concludes on technical grounds that they cannot. Citing stories told ‘about the head that speaks after people have had it cut off’, including the head of a decapitated priest in Arcadia which supposedly named his killer, the philosopher notes that ‘it is impossible to speak when the windpipe has been severed and without motion from the lung. And among the barbarians, who cut off heads with dispatch, no such thing has ever occurred’.² Yet for all Aristotle’s cynicism, tales of heads that continue to speak following their removal can be found in the mythologies of almost every ancient

¹ Janes R., “Beheadings”, in Goodwin S.W. – Bronfen E. (eds.), *Death and Representation* (Baltimore: 1993) 245.

² Aristotle, *De partibus animalium* III, 10, 673a, in Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, trans. J.G. Lennox (Oxford: 2001) 70.

culture: references to prophetic heads were especially common in Jewish and Arabic traditions, with the Biblical *teraphim*, discussed in *Ezekiel* 21.21, being perhaps the oldest recorded version of the motif.³

It has been suggested that these ancient legends of oracular heads travelled from East to West in the Middle Ages, possibly as a result of the crusades.⁴ Yet there were other traditions on which medieval authors could also draw. These traditions tend to fall in one of two categories, depending on whether the object that speaks is organic or inorganic. Sometimes the miracle is derived from the fact that something inhuman – a mechanical or robotic entity, or a three-dimensional image – does the talking. Classical legends about speaking statues and automata, in the form of ‘instruments’ that could perform their own work when ordered, were conjured up by Aristotle in his *Politics* as an alternative to slavery. Aristotle also cites mythological references to such instruments – Daedalus’ statues and Hephaestus’ tripods – in support of his argument that, if such phenomena existed, masters would have no need for slaves.⁵ Oracular idols, statues through which pagan gods speak, are also attested in ancient sources.⁶ And then there was the legend of the ‘golem’, an anthropomorphic being created from mud or clay, which circulated in Jewish folklore. Although golems were not usually attributed specifically with the power of speech or prophecy, this myth, which rests on a belief that certain people have the ability to channel God’s powers of creation, may have influenced later stories about the ability of wise men to invent talking androids.⁷

The second group of stories concerns humans who have been decapitated or dismembered, and whose heads continue to utter words or sounds. The most well-known of these is the myth of Orpheus’ grief for his beloved Eurydice, who Orpheus tries and ultimately fails to rescue from

³ Dickson A., *Valentine and Orson. A Study in Late Medieval Romance* (New York: 1929) 203.

⁴ LaGrandeur K., “The Talking Brass Head as a Symbol of Dangerous Knowledge in *Friar Bacon* and in *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*”, *English Studies* 80,5 (1999) 410.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* I 4, 1253b, in Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, ed. S. Everson (Cambridge: 1996) 15. Daedalus was a master-craftsman whose statues were so lifelike that they looked like they could move; Hephaestus was a metalworker and artisan god, whose tripods were thought to be able to move to and from Mount Olympus of their own accord, as reported in Homer, *Iliad* XVIII, 369. For an overview of automata in classical and medieval literature, see Bruce J.D., “Human Automata in Classical Tradition and Mediaeval Romance”, *Modern Philology* 10,4 (1913) 511–526.

⁶ Dickson, *Valentine* 191–192.

⁷ Higley S.L., “The Legend of the Learned Man’s Android”, in Hahn T. – Lupack A. (eds.), *Retelling Tales. Essays in Honor of Russell Peck* (Cambridge: 1997) 135.

the underworld – a grief so profound that even after death his head, separated from its body, continues to cry out in sorrow. Ovid describes how Orpheus' head, following his murder at the hands of the Ciconian women in book 11 of *Metamorphoses*, is carried along the river Hebrus, swept out to sea, and finally washes ashore on the isle of Lesbos; lying exposed on the beach, a snake tries to swallow it but the god Apollo intervenes in the nick of time. Before it reaches Lesbos, moreover, the head speaks: readers are informed that Orpheus' lifeless mouth, accompanied by the sound of his lyre, murmured some 'mournful phrase'.⁸ Ovid's story draws on Book 4 of Virgil's *Georgics*, which is more specific about the words that issue from the poet's dying lips:

Severed from its marble neck, the disembodied voice and tongue, now cold for ever, called with departing breath on Eurydice – ah, poor Eurydice! 'Eurydice' the banks re-echoed, all along the stream.⁹

The tale of Orpheus' talking head, recently decapitated, was transmitted to medieval culture via translations of Virgil and Ovid. One fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the French verse *Ovide moralisé*, which aimed to discover within Ovid's stories an underlying Christian message, shows Orpheus' head floating in the sea as Apollo rescues it from a menacing looking serpent.¹⁰ The head's eyes and mouth are closed in the illustration, suggesting that it is no longer a talking head. Nonetheless this image of a head that survives after death and needs to be salvaged from wild beasts clearly resonates with tales of Christian martyrs, whose speaking heads, as we shall see, also sometimes miraculously escaped the ravages of nature.

This essay, beginning as it does in the years around 1000, makes no claims to discovering the 'origins' of the talking head topos; other scholars

⁸ 'membra iacent diversa locis, caput, Hebre, lyramque / excipis: et (mirum!) medio dum labitur amne, / flebile nescio quid queritur lyra, flebile lingua / murmurat exanimis, respondent flebile ripae'. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XI, 50–53, ed. and trans. F.J. Miller, 3rd edition, revised G.P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 43 (Cambridge, MA: 1984).

⁹ 'tum quoque marmorea caput a cervice revulsum / gurgite cum medio portans Oeagrius Hebrus / volveret, Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua, / a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat: / Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae'. *Georgics* IV, 523–527, in Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid* I–VI, trans. H.R. Fairclough, revised G.P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge, MA: 1999) 256. It is possible that Ovid's version is a parodic commentary on the overblown rhetoric of Virgil's poem, which explains why Ovid is vague about the words that emerge from Orpheus' mouth. See Anderson W.S., "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid: *fleBILE nescio quid*", in Warden J. (ed.), *Orpheus. The Metamorphosis of a Myth* (Toronto: 1982) 25–50.

¹⁰ Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5069, fol. 145v.

have laid the groundwork for a comprehensive survey of these ancient precursors and analogues.¹¹ What I would like to do, by focusing initially on early medieval manifestations of the motif – and this in a volume devoted predominantly to detached heads in later periods – is to consider the variable uses to which these stories were put in different time frames. How does the narrative travel between one period and another? What different ideological requirements does it serve in each instance? As we shall see, oracular head stories ultimately contribute to early modern constructions of ‘medieval’ as a category: they are filtered through a periodizing lens, which disparages the Middle Ages as a dangerous breeding ground for magic and superstition. But by comparing these early modern appropriations of the motif with its treatment in earlier periods, it may be possible to discern a more multivocal Middle Ages than these later reworkings of the story allow. Also more complex than it first appears is the distinction between the organic and inorganic talking head: beneath this ostensible binary it is possible to discover regions of continuity and overlap. Whether they are made from metal or from flesh and blood, in other words, talking heads repeatedly call into question the line dividing lifeless objects from lively things.

Talking Heads c. 1000: Gerbert of Aurillac and Abbo of Fleury

Our tale begins with a narrative that takes shape in early medieval Rome. Pope Sylvester II, born Gerbert of Aurillac, was a prodigious teacher and scholar who, having reportedly spent several years studying mathematics and astronomy in Spain, became in the year 999 the first French pope. Gerbert died just four years later, in 1003, in what were rumoured to be inauspicious circumstances; by the time the twelfth-century English historian William of Malmesbury got his hands on the churchman’s story, these rumours had morphed into a series of fantastical allegations, including one that associated Gerbert’s death with his inability to comprehend the words of a talking head. According to Malmesbury’s salacious reporting in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (c. 1120), during his studies in Spain Gerbert acquired not only knowledge of the abacus, an implement he seized from Hispanic ‘Saracens’, but he also satisfied a desire to be initiated into the

¹¹ See, in particular, Dickson, *Valentine* 190–215; Kittredge G.L., *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, MA: 1916) 147–194.

darker arts, including the ability to summon up spirits from hell. Gerbert also gained some of this knowledge from Saracens: the chronicler recounts how the pope-to-be resided with a philosopher who was of their *secta*, though when Gerbert makes off with his Saracen teacher's secret book of tricks, he has to make a pact with the devil in order to prevent the victim of the theft from pursuing him. These tales of association with mysterious Saracens and devilry feed into subsequent allegations of Gerbert's evil. While Malmesbury attributes to Gerbert such relatively benign scientific inventions as the mechanical clock and (famously) the steam organ, he is also charged, at the conclusion of the narrative, with manufacturing an object whose purpose was entirely selfish in motivation:

After close inspection of heavenly bodies (at a time, that is, when all the planets were proposing to begin their courses afresh) he cast for himself the head of a statue which could speak, though only if spoken to, but would utter the truth in the form of either Yes or No. If, for example, Gerbert were to say: 'Shall I be pope?' the statue would reply: 'Yes'. 'Shall I die before I sing mass in Jerusalem?' 'No'.¹²

Confident in his belief that if he avoids Jerusalem he will forestall his own death, Gerbert assumes the papacy as an unrepentant man. As the chronicler puts it, the talking head's answer to his question was 'ambiguous and misled him'; it makes Gerbert think that since he is not intending to visit the holy city of Jerusalem any time soon, he can carry out his papal duties without fear. Little does he realise that the talking head's reference to 'Jerusalem' is actually to the church called Jerusalem in Rome (the present-day Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, close to the Lateran), where the pope traditionally sings mass three Sundays in the year. 'Consequently on one of those days', the narrator continues, 'when Gerbert was preparing for mass, he began to groan at a violent stroke of sickness, and, as it increased, took to his bed; on consulting the statue, he understood the deception and his own approaching death'.¹³ Calling his cardinals together, Gerbert laments

¹² 'Fudisse sibi statuae caput certa inspectione siderum, cum uidelicet omnes planetae exordia cursus sui meditarentur, quod non nisi interrogatum loqueretur, sed uerum uel affirmatiue uel negatiue pronuntiaret. Verbi gratia, diceret Gerbertus "Ero Apostolicus?" responderet statua "Etiam". "Moriar antequam cantem missam in Ierusalem?" "Non", Malmesbury William of, *Gesta Regum Anglorum. The History of the English Kings*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, with R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: 1998) 292–295.

¹³ 'Quo illum ambiguo deceptum ferunt, ut nichil excogitaret penitentiae qui animo blandieretur suo de longo tempore uitae: quando enim Ierosolimam ire deliberaret ut mortem stimulet? Nec prouidit quod est Romae aecclesia Ierusalem dicta [...] Quocirca,

his wrongdoings; but, when the dumbstruck cardinals fail to respond, he goes mad and orders that his body be cut to pieces in recompense for his crimes. Thus Gerbert of Aurillac, inventor of the steam organ and the artificial talking head, meets his sorry end.

William of Malmesbury was not the originator of the allegation that Gerbert was in league with the devil. William bases the narrative on an earlier account by the eleventh-century cardinal and schismatic Beno, who blamed Gerbert, via two of his former pupils, for infecting the present pope, Gregory VII, with wickedness. According to Beno, Gerbert questions a demon rather than a talking statue about the date of his death; it is this demon who tells him he will die only after celebrating mass in 'Jerusalem'. Beno wanted to attack, in so doing, the values of the man from whom the Gregorian reform movement took its name, since two of Gregory's teachers had themselves been taught by Gerbert in the previous century. Malmesbury inherits Beno's revisionary account of Gerbert's character, but gives it a novel spin. Now it is not just a demon with whom the pope converses but a mysterious oracular head, a head whose ability to speak is associated with knowledge of astronomy.¹⁴

By a curious twist of fate, the other starting point for my analysis of talking heads is associated with a contemporary of Gerbert's, albeit as author rather than subject of the relevant story. Abbo of Fleury was a churchman who died the year after Gerbert, in 1004, and he had two notable run-ins with Gerbert during his career. Selected, in the year 988, to succeed as head of the Benedictine house of Fleury near Orléans in France, Abbo's election to the post was contested and Gerbert himself intervened in Abbo's favour; conversely, a year later, in 989, Abbo himself opposed Gerbert's elevation to the See of Rheims, following the deposition of the newly-elected archbishop. Gerbert was temporarily suspended from office, so heightened was the level of opposition to his promotion; it must have seemed like tremendous treachery on Abbo's part, after the support Gerbert had lent the monk following his own election to Fleury in the previous year.¹⁵ There is also another sense in which these two

cum uno illorum dierum Gerbertus ad missam se pararet, ut ualitudinis ictus ingemuit, eademque crescente decubuit; consulta statua deceptionem et mortem suam cognouit', Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum* 294–295.

¹⁴ Flusche A.M., *The Life and Legend of Gerbert of Aurillac. The Organbuilder Who Became Pope Sylvester II* (Lewiston, NY: 2005) 82–85.

¹⁵ For more on the various disputes that brought the clerics into confrontation with one another, see Mostert M., *The Political Theology of Abbo of Fleury. A Study of the Ideas about*

churchmen's careers overlap: Abbo, like Gerbert, was a renowned mathematician and astronomer, who composed important treatises on arithmetic and the computation date of Easter. Indeed this similarity may have led William of Malmesbury, in his account of Gerbert's boyhood, mistakenly to identify Gerbert himself as a monk of Fleury, when in fact it was at the monastery of Aurillac that the future pope first embarked on his vocation.¹⁶ For the purposes of this essay, the political and intellectual threads connecting Abbo of Fleury with Gerbert of Aurillac are fortuitous, given that both men are also associated with narratives of talking heads. But, as will become clear in what follows, the head brought to life by Abbo speaks with a very different voice from the one conjured up by Gerbert.

Just a year or two before Abbo was elected abbot of Fleury, during a teaching appointment at a religious house in England, he was invited to set down in writing a story that had recently been relayed to him by Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury. Dunstan recounted to Abbo a tale that he in turn had heard in his youth, from a man who had actually witnessed the relevant events. The tale in question concerned the defeat of the East Anglian king Edmund by the Danes, and his subsequent martyrdom in the year 869. In Abbo's text, the *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, pious, virginal Edmund is pitted against two bloodthirsty Danish tyrants, Hingwar and Hubba, who came to Britain, as the narrator puts it, 'hardened with the stiff frost of their own wickedness', straight from the roof of hell.¹⁷ Once the Danes have first captured Edmund they proceed shamefully to insult and beat him, before tying him to a tree and scourging him with lashes; next he is shot with javelins till he resembles a prickly hedgehog; finally, Hingwar orders the prisoner to be beheaded.¹⁸

So far, so familiar. Edmund's Christ-like sufferings unfold in a manner typical of passion narratives of this kind: saint meets pagan; pagan torments saint repeatedly; pagan beheads saint; saint goes to heaven. Where the real interest of the story lies is what happens following the

Society and Law of the Tenth-Century Monastic Reform Movement (Hilversum: 1987) 48; Dachowski E., *First Among Abbots. The Career of Abbo of Fleury* (Washington, DC: 2008).

¹⁶ 'Ex Gallia natus, monachus a puero apud Floriacum adoleuit', Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum* 280.

¹⁷ 'Nec mirum, cum venerint indurati frigore suae malitiae ab illo terrae vertice, quo sedem suam posuit qui per elationem Altissimo similis esse concupivit', Abbo of Fleury, "Passio Sancti Eadmundi", in *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi. The Garland of Saint Edmund King and Martyr*, ed. F. Hervey (London: 1907) 18–19.

¹⁸ Abbo, *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* 32–37.

execution, a series of events that, according to Abbo's source Dunstan, were witnessed directly by a certain man who had, by the power of God, remained hidden from the murderous Danes. Intent on maintaining the division of Edmund's body into pieces (presumably to ensure that he really does remain dead), the Danes hide the martyr's decapitated head in brambles; grieving because of their king's murder, and especially because of his missing head, Edmund's East Anglian subjects embark on a search for the saint's remains. A human head would be a tasty morsel for the inhabitants of the woods in which Edmund's head is hidden, but miraculously God sends a wolf to guard the head against other beastly predators. Then comes the climactic moment in the narrative: after members of the search party call out 'where are you?' to their former king, the head itself responds in their 'native tongue' the words 'here, here, here' (words that Abbo thoughtfully translates for his Latin readership) until finally the head is found.¹⁹

A manuscript produced c. 1130 in Bury St Edmunds, England, where Edmund's body, reunited with its head, eventually came to rest, illustrates Abbo's text with a series of very striking images. This volume, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, places particular emphasis on the varying fortunes of Edmund's talking head, devoting no less than four full-page illustrations (out of a total of thirty two) to the head's rediscovery and reattachment to its body. As Cynthia Hahn points out in her analysis of the Morgan manuscript's image sequence, the episodes described in these illustrations implicitly play on an analogy between the king as head of state, Christ as head of the Church, and saint as spiritual 'head' of his or her nation; Edmund, as king and martyr, 'joins both metaphors of spiritual and royal head in the same person'.²⁰ The relevant scenes depict, in turn, (i) the discovery of the headless body of Edmund; (ii) the discovery of Edmund's head in the woods, which is guarded, touchingly, by the wolf [Fig. 1]; (iii) the carrying of the head back to the body, the wolf following on behind; and (iv) the reconnection of the head to the body, after which,

¹⁹ 'Vispillonum sane more pluribus pedentim inuia perlustrantibus, cum jam posset audiri loquens, ad voces se invicem cohortantium, et utpote socii ad socium alternatim clamantium, Ubi es? Illud respondebat, designando locum, patria lingua dicens, Her, her, her. Quod interpretatum Latinus sermo exprimit, Hic, hic, hic'. Abbo, *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* 40–41.

²⁰ Hahn C., "Peregrinato et Natio. The Illustrated Life of Edmund, King and Martyr", *Gesta* 30,2 (1991) 127.



Fig. 1. "Discovery of St Edmund's head", miniature in illuminated copy of Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* (ca. 1130). New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 736, fol. 16r. Image © The Pierpont Morgan Library.

according to Abbo, there was no sign that it had ever been detached, save for a thin red line.²¹

The presence of the wolf in these scenes is crucial. His devotion to the head conveys the head's persistent aliveness – its enduring ability to communicate meaning – since the thing with which the wolf is bonded is no dead entity. Nonetheless the Morgan images themselves, which depict the martyr's head consistently with closed eyes and mouth, fail to communicate visually its capacity for speech. The scene illustrating the head's discovery, for instance, makes no explicit reference to the saint's postmortem ability to speak [Fig. 1]. It is the motif of the wolf guarding the head like a domestic dog and touchingly remaining with it even during its translation from the wilderness into sacred space that draws attention the fact that this is a head like no other.

Other versions of Edmund's martyrdom produced in later centuries take up Abbo's image of the talking head and explain it with reference to examples of speech miraculously emerging from the mouths of animals. Lydgate's fifteenth-century Middle English rendition compares the episode to the Old Testament narrative of Balaam's ass, in *Numbers* 22:28, where the prophet's donkey is given the power to speak – a comparison that he imports directly from Abbo. But Lydgate also makes reference in this context to the legend of St Eustace, who, hearing voices from a stag, converted to Christianity. 'For', as Lydgate puts it, 'god hath power and Jursydicioun / Make tongis speke of bodies that be ded / Record I take of kyng Edmond's hed'.²² Lydgate extends his analogy between the talking head and talking animals in his elaboration of Abbo's wolf motif, by suggesting that the wolf itself goes against the laws of nature in feeling such affection for a human head. As the time comes for Edmund to be buried,

The said wolff in maner gan compleyne
That he so hih a tresor hath forgo;
To folwe the martir dide his besy peyne,
Wolde in no wise departe the body froo:
Of bestial love felte a maner woo,
Forto dissevere thowhte a gret penance
Fro thylke thyng where stood al his plesance.

²¹ New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 736, fols. 15v–17r.

²² Lydgate J., *Life of Sts Edmund and Fremond*, in *Altenglische Legenden. Neue Folge*, ed. C. Horstmann (Heilbronn: 1878) 413, ll. 929–931.

It is no merveile, the beeste was not to blame,
 Thouh he were wo to parte fro his richesse!
 Which ageyn nature maad him to be tame,
 That to no-man he shewed no fersnesse.²³

Crucial in these lines is Lydgate's reference to the head as 'tresor' and 'richesse': Edmund's head is not only capable of speech but also, for a beast that naturally would have no such sense of value, it becomes a precious relic. Thus, in the illustrations accompanying a presentation copy of Lydgate's poem now in the British Library (Harley 2278), viewers are confronted with a dramatic transformation between the moment immediately after Edmund's death, when blood spurts from the martyr's neck and his eyes appear closed [Fig. 2], and the scene a few pages later where the blood has disappeared and the eyes have opened [Fig. 3].²⁴ The head is now surrounded by a golden aura, transformed, like the head reliquaries in which saint's decapitated skulls were sometimes enclosed, into something shining and sublime. Here is a head that not only talks in the tongue of the people dedicated to its preservation, but also speaks, quite conventionally, the language of late medieval piety. Bearing witness to Edmund's life in heaven, it conveys a message that ultimately derives from God.

If God is the supreme ventriloquist in Abbo's narrative of unnatural speech, Gerbert of Aurillac's talking head is demonically motivated – at least, if we are to believe Malmesbury's distorted view of the affair. Gerbert's head allows its real inventor, the twelfth-century chronicler, to disparage a former pope; to devalue the so-called 'Saracen' learning of Arab and classical scholars; and in so doing to entertain his readers with a slanderous story. By contrast Abbo's head allows the monk of Fleury to tell a tale that connects political metaphors of headship – heads of state, heads of religion – with discourses of language and identity, discourses that subsequently contribute to an emerging idea of English nationhood. Versions of Edmund's story inserted into manuscripts of the *South English Legendary*, a large anthology of saints' lives first collated towards the end of the thirteenth century, emphasise this aspect explicitly, by drawing attention to the specific Englishness of the head's holy speech: the head says the words 'Al an Englisch her, her, her', as though it were alive, according

²³ Lydgate, *Life of Sts Edmund and Fremond* 413, ll. 960–970.

²⁴ For further discussion of these images and the complete run of miniatures, see Edwards A.S.G., *The Life of St Edmund King and Martyr, John Lydgate's Illustrated Verse Life Presented to Henry VI. A Facsimile of British Library MS Harley 2278* (London: 2004).



Fig. 2. "Martyrdom of St Edmund", miniature in illuminated copy of Lydgate's *Life of Sts Edmund and Fremond* (after 1434). London, British Library, Harley MS 2278, fol. 63v. Image © British Library Board.

to the most complete early version of the collection.²⁵ Against the backdrop of other expressions of national sentiment in *South English Legendary* manuscripts, this is a reference that seems designed deliberately to reinforce connections between the language of readers and the identity of Edmund himself as a figure of nationwide importance.²⁶ (It was not until

²⁵ D'Evelyn C. – Mills A.J. (eds.), *The South English Legendary. Edited from Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 145 and British Museum MS Harley 2277*, vol. II, Early English Text Society original series 236 (Oxford: 1956) 514, l. 79.

²⁶ For general discussion of the discourse of nation in *South English Legendary* manuscripts, see Frederick J., "The *South English Legendary*. Anglo-Saxon Saints and National Identity", in Scragg D. – Weinberg C. (eds.), *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: 2000) 57–73; Jankofsky K., "National Characteristics in the Portrayal of Saints in the *South English Legendary*", in Blumenfield-Kosinski R. – Szell T. (eds.), *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: 1991) 81–93.



Fig. 3. "Discovery of St Edmund's head", miniature in illuminated copy of Lydgate's *Life of Sts Edmund and Fremond* (after 1434). London, British Library, Harley MS 2278, fol. 66r. Image © British Library Board.

the late fourteenth century that St Edmund's role as a 'national' saint, invoked in the coronation of English kings, began to be supplanted by St George.) In each example the source of the voice is utterly dissimilar: one speaks the deceptive language of the devil, the other the truthful words of God. But these heads also intersect with one another by virtue of the ideological functions they fulfil. An analogy with ventriloquism is apt in this context, for talking heads really are just puppets in the hands of their respective masters, communicating powerful messages about the identities of their audiences and creators.

Retelling the Tale 1100–1700: Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon and the Head of Brass

To push this analogy further, it is worth pursuing other strands of the topos of the talking head, which, precisely by virtue of its capacity to speak in several voices, generates ambivalence and ambiguity. Heads may be invested with speech by means of magic as well as miracle, as we have seen; when Gerbert's own magical head speaks it is in tones that are deliberately evasive. This presents a marked contrast to the saintly heads of miracle, which speak words of purity and truth: nothing could be less confusing it seems, than the words 'here, here, here' that Abbo puts in the mouth of Edmund king and martyr. When learned men such as Gerbert are cast as magicians, it follows that the objects for which they are responsible are characterized as malign. Inventions made by clever people are suspect and untrustworthy, the very opposite of virginal saintly heads.

We see this trope of misleading speech playing out in numerous other instances of the talking head topos in later centuries: William's tall story about Gerbert is just one in a long line of anecdotes linking artificial speaking heads with learned men. These repetitions and reworkings of the motif include a story first propagated by the Yorkshire chronicler William of Newburgh, who, writing a few decades after William of Malmesbury, describes what happened to a certain Stephen de Tours, seneschal of Anjou, during the reign of Richard Lionheart. According to William of Newburgh's *Historia rerum Anglicarum* (1198), Stephen is entrusted with responsibility for governing England while Richard is overseas, but, becoming convinced that Richard is never going to return, he begins to overstep the mark. All the same, wishing to make absolutely sure that the king is gone for good, Stephen decides to consult a man from Toledo. This man, who has a reputation for divining the future, should be

able to settle once and for all the question of whether Richard is coming back. The sorcerer takes Stephen into a secret room, shows him a head, and tells him he can ask the head questions, just so long as he keeps them brief. So Stephen's first question is 'Shall I see King Richard?' to which an 'evil spirit' replies from within the head 'No'; then he asks how long he will be in power as administrator of England, to which the head replies 'Until your death'; finally he asks where he is going to die, and the head responds 'in pluma'. Interpreting the head's final reply to mean that he will die on feathers (since the Latin term for feathers is *pluma*), Stephen instructs his servants henceforth never to let any feathers near him and thinks, as a result of this precaution, that he will forego death. Eventually, however, the governor discovers, just like Gerbert, that the talking head's message is less clear-cut than he had originally assumed – albeit too late for him to do anything about it. For at some unspecified moment in the future Stephen is out oppressing one of his nobles, pursuing the man in question to his castle; little does Stephen realise that the name of the castle in which he is besieging the noble is itself called Pluma, and lo and behold it is there that he meets his end.²⁷ Significantly the chronicler also makes reference, following the Stephen anecdote, to the similarity between this incident and the Gerbert narrative: the 'pseudo-pope', Newburgh declares, was 'devoted to sacrilegious magic, and he inquired of a brazen head when he should die'. Newburgh's own collection of anecdotes about talking heads and other oracles is repeated, in abbreviated form, by the fourteenth-century historian Ranulph Higden in his *Polychronicon*, a text that circulated in English translations as well as the original Latin into the late fifteenth century.²⁸

With each retelling of the tale, a new layer is added: Higden's text follows William of Newburgh in making reference to a *caputa aeneum*, a head made from bronze. As with the original Gerbert narrative, there is a clear connection here between talking heads and the scientific knowledge acquired by contact with Muslim-controlled Spain; but the idea that the oracular head is now metallic also draws it into the ambit of classical idolatry. Although the surviving artefacts of Roman and Greek religion, such as statues of gods and goddesses, are frequently made of marble, many such objects were also made of bronze. Presumably medieval people would

²⁷ William of Newburgh, "Historia rerum Anglicarum", in *The Church Historians of England*, ed. J. Stevenson, vol. IV, 2 (London: 1856) 626–627.

²⁸ Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum* 627; Higden Ranulf, *Polychronicon*, ed. J.R. Lumby, Rolls Series 41, vol. VIII (London: 1882) 133–135.

occasionally have encountered these pagan survivals themselves. Sometimes they were designed as busts, depicting only the head of the deity; often, though, the heads may originally have been part of full-size statues. Heads were normally cast separately from their accompanying bodies, which explains why they often survive in a detached state.²⁹ Bronze statues were also cast in the likeness of rulers such as Roman emperors, perhaps for display in a civic context. These too may have been known to medieval audiences. There are bronzes from Roman Britain, for instance, now in the collections of the British Museum, which depict the heads of emperors such as Claudius (10–54) and Hadrian (76–138).³⁰ Christian audiences were thus being asked to make connections, via the brazen head motif, between the religious customs of ancient Greece and Rome and the new-fangled forms of knowledge then circulating on the Iberian Peninsula, as mediated in William of Malmesbury's story of Gerbert's dealings with Hispanic 'Saracens'. This was part of a general tendency among medieval Christian commentators to conflate the belief systems of Muslim cultures with classical paganism: despite the explicit rejection of idolatry in Islamic doctrine, Muslims were often misrepresented as idol-worshipping pagans.³¹ The brazen head motif, linked geographically in some of these stories with Moorish Spain, functions as one voice in a chorus of condemnations that associated Saracen devotional practices with evil. References to the head's inorganic materiality such as William of Newburgh's and Higden's also draw attention to the role played by devilry in animating a metallic object. A substance that should, by definition, be static and unthinking acquires the ability to communicate only because there is a ghost in the machine.

An explicit witness to this connection between talking heads and idolatry can be found in medieval art. Although in manuscript illuminations idols are generally depicted as full-bodied statues, or alternatively as actual demons, there is an eye-catching miniature in a late twelfth-

²⁹ For an overview of portrait bronzes, and reproductions of a variety of classical bronze heads, see Mattusch C.C., *Classical Bronzes. The Art and Craft of Greek and Roman Statuary* (Ithaca and London: 1996) 68–100.

³⁰ See British Museum, catalogue P&EE 1965 12–11 (Claudius), reproduced at <http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/young_explorers/discover/museum_explorer/roman_britain/leaders_and_rulers/head_of_claudius.aspx> (accessed 30 September 2011), and British Museum, catalogue P&EE 1848 11-3 1 (Hadrian), reproduced at <http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/young_explorers/discover/museum_explorer/roman_britain/leaders_and_rulers/head_of_hadrian.aspx> (accessed 30 September 2011).

³¹ On representations of Saracens as classical pagans, see Tolan J.V., *Saracens. Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: 2002) 105–134.



Fig. 4. Initial to 1 Maccabees 1–2 in illustrated Bible (late 12th century). Miniature. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS lat. 16745, fol. 197v. Image © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

century bible manuscript, cited by Michael Camille in his survey of the Gothic idol, which seems to make the link [Fig. 4]. The miniature in question illustrates a scene in 1 Maccabees 1–2, which describes how king Antiochus (Epiphanes) sets up idols on Jewish altars and forces them to make sacrifices at these ‘abominable’ places. The scene shows, in the top register, Antiochus ordering Jews to worship idols, and in the bottom register the rebellious Mathathias, who, standing firm against the introduction of

these 'evil' practices, takes it upon himself to slay one of the idol-worshippers at the altar. What is significant for the purposes of this discussion is that the object being adored by the idolaters is a grimacing, disembodied head. Between one register and the next, the head appears to have moved forward slightly, like a frame in an animated cartoon; the head's mouth is wide open, as if it really is capable of speech and movement. Camille rightly associates this form of head-idol with classical statue busts – like bronze heads, remnants of a pagan past with which a medieval audience would have been familiar.³² This image thus encapsulates precisely what is at stake when tales about talking heads are used to denigrate the head's owners and makers. Blending together myths of Islamic idol worship with the remnants of a pagan European past, these heads neatly encode a suspicion that those individuals with a penchant for classical and Arabic knowledge will be tainted with the religious cultures in which those bodies of learning first developed.

Of course, as we have seen, there are also examples of oracular heads in medieval culture where the whiff of idolatry and devil-worship no longer lingers. Abbo's passion of St Edmund represents a 'positive' instance of the phenomenon, and this is by no means the only example of a prophetic head in medieval hagiography. The thirteenth-century *Legenda Aurea*, for example, includes within the life of the desert saint Macarius a short anecdote, in which the protagonist finds a skull and proceeds to question it on the make-up of the inhabitants of hell. The skull answers all Macarius's questions and we learn, as a result, that false Christians are buried deeper in hell even than Jews.³³ Sometimes talking heads do tell the truth, though crucially in this instance the materiality of the object is different: as a skull its origins are obviously organic (unlike the metallic brazen head); as the dead remnant of a real body, its speech has more in common with Edmund's miraculous head than with the magical inventions constructed with the aid of astronomy and science.

Again, however, as already noted, beneath this apparent opposition it is possible to discern areas of similarity and overlap: the saint's head, once detached from its body, may itself take on some of the qualities associated with inorganic metallic heads through its transformation into a relic. We

³² Camille M., *The Gothic Idol. Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: 1989) 66.

³³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Readings on the Saints*, ed. W.G. Ryan, (Princeton: 1993) vol I, 90.

have already seen this in an illustration of Lydgate's English rendition of Edmund's *passio* [Fig. 3], which depicts the head transformed into a sparkling object akin to a reliquary bust. Another story almost contemporary with Abbo of Fleury and Gerbert of Aurillac, which tells of just such a transformation, appears in a verse legend ascribed to the tenth-century intellectual and playwright Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. Hrotsvit's *passio* of St Pelagius describes how the youthful protagonist is beheaded by an evil caliph in Cordoba, after refusing the caliph's advances; Pelagius' body and decapitated head are thrown out to sea; subsequently the body parts are picked up by fishermen, who proceed to sell them to a group of Christians. Before being officially venerated as a relic, however, the saint's head is tested by being placed in a raging furnace by its new owners. If Pelagius's skin and hair remain unharmed, say the Christians, they will be able to confirm that the miracles taking place around the body are a result of God's grace rather than of something more sinister. After casting the head into the flames for a full hour, the worshippers subject it to an inspection. 'But now', Hrotsvit announces, 'it glowed more splendidly than pure gold, completely untouched by the raging heat'.³⁴ The comparison between the head's wholeness and precious metal serves to evoke its status as a holy object. Pelagius's head communicates, with visual appearance rather than words, a message about the permanence and immortality of the sacred body. If the holy martyr's oracular head is initially conceived as a corporeal entity, in other words, it also ultimately shares with the magical heads attributed to scientists a metallic form. In medieval relic cults this transfiguration took shape quite literally. 'Speaking reliquaries', so-called because they visually communicate or 'speak' the nature of the body parts contained within, were made of metals such as gold and silver, the surfaces of which were often also studded with other symbols of permanence and beauty such as precious stones.³⁵ Reliquaries manufactured to contain the skulls of martyrs thus present a precise analogue to the golden head evoked in Hrotsvit's Pelagius narrative.

Going beyond hagiography in search of positive prophetic heads, it is also worth considering an episode in the French romance *Valentin et*

³⁴ 'Quod iam splendidius puro radiaverat auro, / Expers ardoris penitus tantique caloris', Hrotsvit, *Passio Sancti Pelagii* 404–405, in *Hrotsvithae Opera*, ed. H. Homeyer (Paderborn: 1970) 146.

³⁵ On the category of the 'speaking reliquary' and for specific examples of head-shaped reliquaries, see Bagnoli M. – Klein H.A. – Mann C.G. – Robinson J. (eds.), *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (London: 2011) 25, 83–84, 191–95.

Orson, printed in Lyon in 1489.³⁶ English translations of the French text proved especially popular into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, running into numerous editions.³⁷ In the Lyon text the two protagonists, who can remember nothing of their parents or upbringing, arrive at a glittering castle, the owner of which is a fair lady who, having observed Valentin's boldness in attempting to enter the castle, immediately falls head over heels in love. What makes Valentin so eager to visit the castle is that it contains a chamber in which is kept *une teste d'arain* ('a head of brass'), which apparently only speaks the truth.³⁸ Eventually Valentin gets to question the head and discovers not only that his travelling companion Orson is his brother, but also that he is destined to marry the lady of the castle and that he himself is the son of an emperor.³⁹

This motif of the metallic talking head seems to have become especially popular between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, when scholars and scientists became associated with such devices, part of a wider tradition of the learned man's android that persisted into the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ John Gower, for instance, writes in the *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390) of a 'hed of brass' forged by Robert Grosseteste. The name Grosseteste itself is a conflation of the French words *grosse tête* ('big head'), so Gower's reference may deliberately be playing on that association.⁴¹ In a popular prose narrative *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (c. 1555) the medieval scientist Roger Bacon (d. c. 1292), an associate of Grosseteste, acquires a similar tool. *The Famous Historie* was transformed into a play towards the end of the century by the Elizabethan dramatist Robert Greene, whose *Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594) describes the scientist as a man so learned that he is able to harness unseen forces such as the weather and demons. Bacon's brass bust, which is represented in the play

³⁶ *Valentin et Orson* (Lyon, Jacques Mailliet: 1489). Discussion in Dickson, *Valentine* 190.

³⁷ See, e.g., *The Famous History of Valentine and Orson. The Two Sons of the Emperor of Greece*, 22nd edition (London, J. Bew: 1787) 85–90.

³⁸ The truth-telling properties of the prophetic head are also connected, of course, to the phenomenon of the cephalophore, or head-carrying saint, as explored by Montgomery in this volume.

³⁹ *Valentin et Orson* chapter 23.

⁴⁰ Higley, "Learned Man's Android".

⁴¹ Gower John, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. R.A. Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: 2003) book IV, ll. 234–43. For another, early sixteenth-century version of the Grosseteste story, see Dickson, *Valentine*, 211–212. Contemporary with Gower, Henry Knighton, in his *Chronicle* (c. 1396) reports on a marvellous talking wax head that he witnessed in Oxford in 1387. See Knighton Henry, *Chronicon*, ed. J.R. Lumby Rolls Series 92, vol. II (London: 1889–95) 258, discussed in Dickson, *Valentine* 212.

both as an embodiment of the scientist's own intelligence and as a meeting point for the manipulated forces of nature, functions emblematically, to draw attention to the vanity of unrestrained intellectual ambition.⁴² The title page to a 1630 edition of the play [Fig. 5] uses a woodcut lifted from sixteenth-century editions of the *Famous Historie*, which depicts the sensational climax to the story: 'Time is, time was, time is past', the machine declares, from scrolls emerging from its mouth, while Bacon lies asleep, oblivious to the head's prophesy after his servant Miles has failed to wake him.⁴³ Here the disembodied head, menacingly large compared to human heads in the woodcut, conveys qualities it has inherited from its medieval precursors: those who use knowledge for their own ends, rather than for the divination of spiritual or philosophical truth, have literally become 'big-headed'. Another, continental instance of the phenomenon of the learned man manipulating nature in order to fulfil his thirst for knowledge occurs in Martin Del Rio's *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex*, published in Mainz at the turn of the seventeenth century, where even the natural philosopher Albert the Great is said to have possessed a brazen, prophetic head.⁴⁴ Perhaps ironically, given that he was also the man behind the story of Orpheus' miraculously talking head, the Roman author Virgil was also attributed with the power to construct automata in medieval romances. These included references to a head that, like Gerbert's, was thought to have delivered an ambiguous message predicting the enchanter's death.⁴⁵

Depictions of oracular automata in early modern England locate the motif in the medieval (Catholic) past, as a means of passing comment on the present as an age of (Protestant) reason. Embodying the danger of combining a scientist's fierce intellect with his mastery of mysterious natural forces, Bacon's experience reflects a prevailing tradition in Reformation

⁴² LaGrandeur, "Talking Brass Head" 408–422.

⁴³ As Dickson points out, the threefold structure of the prophecy recalls that of the Oxford marvel recorded by Henry Knighton in 1387, which declares 'Caput decidetur, caput elevabitur, pedes elevabuntur super caput'. See Dickson, *Valentine* 212–213, and above n. 41.

⁴⁴ Del Rio Martin, *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* (Mainz, J. Albin: 1600) vol. I, iii, 70–72. This association of Albert the Great with a brazen head draws on earlier mentions of him as the inventor of a mechanical talking statue, e.g. Matteo Corsini's *Rosaio della Vita* (1373), discussed in Dickson, *Valentine* 213–214.

⁴⁵ The story of Virgil's automata is related in *L'Image du Monde* of Gautier de Metz (c. 1246) and the anonymous *Renart le Contrefait* (after 1319), as discussed in Bruce, "Human Automata" 11; Dickson, *Valentine* 207–208.

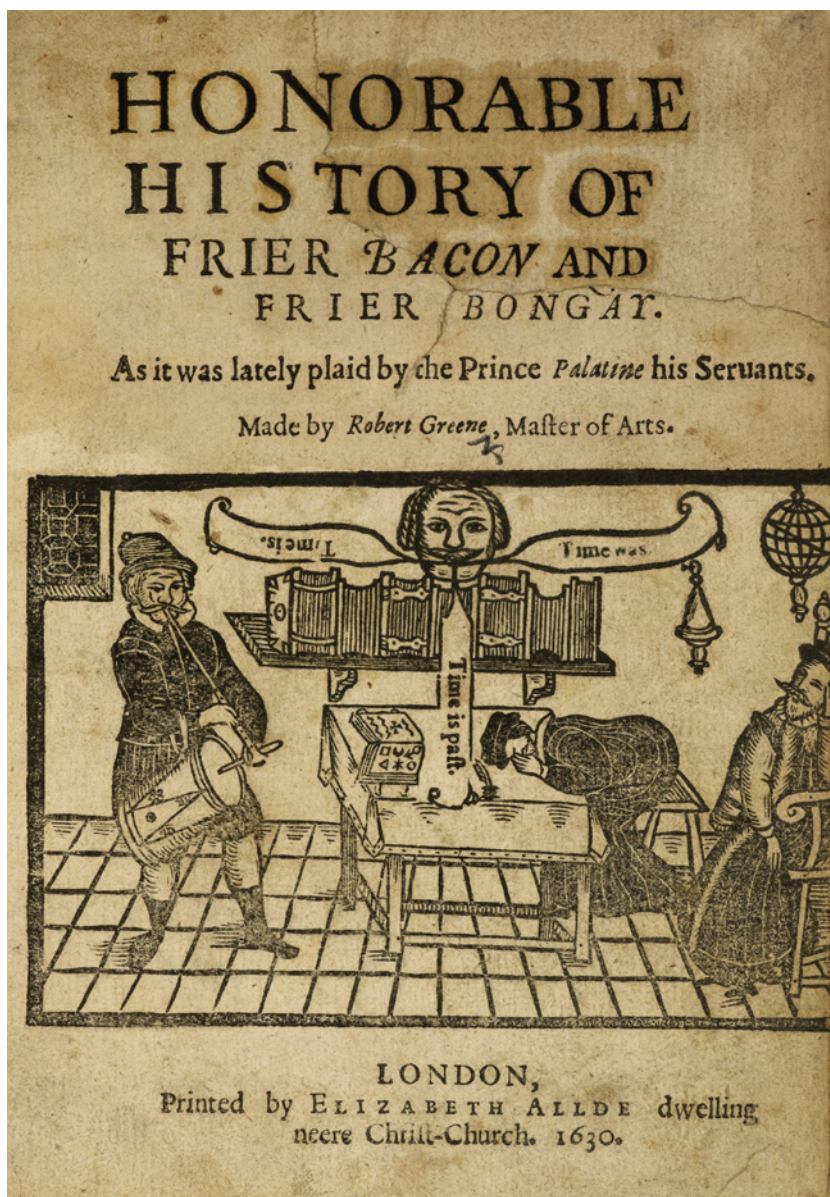


Fig. 5. Title page to Robert Greene's *Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (London, Elizabeth Allde: 1630). Woodcut. Image © British Library Board.

propaganda associating the Middle Ages with magic and the occult.⁴⁶ We see this when, after uttering its 'Time is, time was, time is past' prophesy in Greene's *Honourable History*, instead of delivering further philosophical pronouncements, the head explodes dramatically in a thunderclap; it is this event that precipitates the scientist's eventual renunciation of magic. The narrative thus presents Bacon initially as the embodiment of all that was wrong with the Catholic past. Embodying the stereotypical traits of friars in anticlerical satire, he eventually turns his back on such foolhardy 'medieval' practices. Yet as Deanne Williams has recently argued, Greene's play also deliberately transforms the sixteenth-century prose *Famous Historie* into a meditation on the limitations of such a stereotyped approach to history. While Greene's Bacon certainly fulfils the homogenous conception of a Middle Ages steeped in superstition, the play as a whole also works to trouble such notions, by exploding (rather like the talking head itself) the idea of a linear conception of history through the inclusion of a series of wildly discordant classical allusions. Unlike its prose precursor, the play's presentation of Bacon as a blundering buffoon is ultimately ironic: the talking head, with its oversimplified view of history as 'Time is, time was, time is past', stands in symbolically for all that is wrong with prevailing conceptions of a homogenous medieval past in Reformation polemic.⁴⁷

Leaving aside Greene's efforts to communicate a more nuanced, even contradictory conception of the period, even within the Middle Ages themselves the oracular head could be appropriated in the service of contrasting, even ideologically opposed agendas. This tale of two clerics, the tale of a talking head, was invented by Abbo of Fleury as a means of foregrounding a Christian martyr's capacity for eternal life; but Abbo's contemporary and sometime rival Gerbert of Aurillac gets associated with a speaking head that highlights his own capacity for evil. Nothing could be more different, it seems, than a wonderful Christian miracle and a troublesome pagan marvel. But concealed behind this apparent polarity is a more complex picture. Mesmerizing and repellent, the impulse to speak the head – to ventriloquize – is strong precisely because talking heads straddle the line between miracle and magic, truth and falsehood. If, for medieval Christian commentators, there was no equivalence between

⁴⁶ Williams D., "Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay and the Rhetoric of Temporality", in McMullan G. – Matthews D. (eds.), *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: 2007) 32.

⁴⁷ Williams, "Friar Bacon".

these two types of head worship, for later audiences, looking back on this material, the divisions prove much harder to maintain.

Conclusion: Look Who's Talking

If talking head stories have contributed to narratives about periodization and the divide between medieval and modern, there is also evidence that medieval Christians themselves experienced confusion when it came to divining the messages conveyed by talking heads. I would like to conclude, on this note, by invoking one final example of a head that is potentially invested with the multivocality and ambivalence that I have outlined in this essay. In 1307 the Knights Templar were arrested by Philip IV of France and accused of denying Christ, spitting on the Cross and indulging in all manner of illicit practices, including sodomy and idolatry. Strikingly the principal idol they are alleged to worship takes the form of a disembodied head. Again and again, in the depositions of Templars and their associates, head-idols are described as an object of devotion around which Templar worship is organized. These confessions were elicited under torture, it should be recalled, and we should not attribute to the allegations historical truth-value. As with other charges, such as sodomy, oftentimes the accused were probably not guilty as charged. But one deposition, more than most, stands out among the witnesses to Templar 'idolatry': the confession of one Guillaume d'Arreblay, Preceptor of Soissy, who described how he had seen on the altar at chapter meetings a head that he had been told belonged to one of the 11,000 virgins (the women who, according to medieval legend, sailed to their deaths in Cologne while accompanying St Ursula on a pilgrimage).⁴⁸ However Guillaume, presumably under duress as a result of torture, evokes a completely different kind of head in his description. He recalls seeing a two-faced image, with a 'terrible countenance' and a 'silver beard', which is precisely the kind of metallic, deceptive, devilishly motivated head associated with Gerbert's death in Rome. More telling, still, is the description of an object found following a search of the Temple at Paris, where Guillaume said he had seen this vision:

⁴⁸ On the relic cult of St Ursula and the 11,000 virgins more generally, see Montgomery S., *St Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne. Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe* (Bern: 2009).

a certain large beautiful silver-gilt head, shaped like that of a woman, within which were the bones of a single head, rolled up and stitched in a certain white linen cloth, red muslin having been placed over it, and there was sewn in there a certain document on which was written *capud lviii* [i.e. head no. 58], and the said bones were considered as similar to the bones of the head of a small woman, and it was said by some that it was the head of one of the eleven thousand virgins.⁴⁹

The operative words in this passage are 'it was said by some': who does the saying determines whether a disembodied head is endowed with positive significance, as a Christian relic, or with all the illegitimacy that comes with allegations of non-Christian idolatry. The severed head speaks with several voices, to be sure. But it is the power of the ventriloquist to determine which of those voices gets heard that constitutes the moral of our tale.

⁴⁹ 'Per quem allatum fuit eis quoddam magnum capud argenteum deauratum pulcrum, figuram muliebrem habens, intra quod erant ossa unius capitis, involuta et consuta in quodam panno lineo albo, syndone rubea superposita, et erat ibi quedam cedula consuta in qua erat scriptum capud lviii, et dicta ossa assimilabantur ossibus capitis parvi muliebris, et dicebatur ab aliquibus quod erat capud unius undecim millium virginum', Michelet J. (ed.), *Le Procès des Templiers*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1841–1851) vol. II, 218. Discussion in Barber M., *The Trial of the Templars* (London: 1978) 190.

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THE MEANING OF THE HEAD IN HIGH MEDIEVAL CULTURE

Esther Cohen

In 1271, John Pecham (ca. 1240–1292), future archbishop of Canterbury, but at the time still a Parisian master, participated in a quodlibetal debate.¹ He was asked why martyrs, who were usually immune to most lethal weapons, succumbed to the sword. His answer – short, brusque, and unsophisticated – betrays more than a hint of impatience. First he cited some cases of martyrs who had withstood decapitation by sword as well, but then admitted that, indeed, swords (used for decapitation) killed more martyrs than other tortures. The reason for this he found in the hierarchy of the universe. Fire, water, and wild beasts were all irrational entities, subject to divine law. But man was rational, and had freedom of choice, and those who chose evil could wield swords and kill saints with God's permission. Besides, as Christ had died of an effusion of blood, God permitted the martyrs to imitate him in the mode of death.²

Indeed, whoever had posed the question had a point. One after another, martyrs in legends survive the most terrible of tortures, mutilation and fires included, only to be taken aside and summarily beheaded at the end. From the narrative point of view, this makes sense: martyrs thirst for death, but must be seen to be victors in the arena, defeating torture and even receiving occasional miraculous healing in between sessions. They must also berate the tyrannical judges who ordered their torture while still alive.³ So first martyrs miraculously vanquished lethal tortures, but they were not destined to survive, for death was the ultimate triumph. As the narrative demanded the martyr's death, he or she could easily be dispatched with a sword stroke once the battle was done. There are several such cases: a good example of such martyrdom is St. Denis. First he

¹ For the quodlibetal debates and the resultant literature, see: Wippel J.F., "Quodlibetal Questions", in Bazàn B.C. – Fransen G. – Jacquart, D. (eds.), *Les questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine*, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental 44–45 (Turnhout: 1985) vol. II, 153–224.

² John Pecham, *Quodlibeta Quatuor*, ed. G.I. Etzkorn – F. Delorme, Bibliotheca Franciscana Scholastica Medii Aevi 25 (Quaracchi: 1989) 273–274, q. 46.

³ Cohen E., *The Modulated Scream. Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: 2010) 229–249.

was whipped and imprisoned. The following day he was stretched naked on an iron grill over a fire, then thrown to the beasts (who refused to bite him), crucified and taken down, and after all that he still celebrated mass in prison. It was only on the third day, after further torture, that he was beheaded.⁴ Less drawn-out, but still significant, was the late second-century martyrdom of St. Perpetua. She was first taken into the arena nearly nude and attacked by a wild cow, whereupon she lost her senses. When she regained consciousness, she had neither memory nor scars of the attack. Then she was taken aside for a private beheading – a remarkable action indicating that beheading was not part of the arena entertainment. And yet, the final martyrdom was not a beheading, but a botched one. Perpetua herself had to guide the hand of the inept legionary to the proper place for a beheading. Only then, when the martyr had shown active participation in the separation of her head from her body, was the battle won and the martyrdom counted a success. St. Agnes also went unharmed through shameful nudity and a brothel, followed by two (or four, depending upon the source), fires, to end her life privately by the sword.⁵ It is significant that martyrdom tales, from the earliest *gesta* to late medieval legendaries, take the decapitation out of the arena.

Other than the fact that the jaded appetite of Romans for tortured death required games rather than a plain execution (unlike modern spectators), the withdrawal from public gaze in order to complete the death makes sense in terms of Roman law. At least in classical Roman law decapitation (*decollatio*) was a legal form of execution only for the free Roman citizen. That a Roman citizen should be condemned to death was shameful enough in itself without the added shame of the arena and the spectacle of playing with death. A condemned Roman was more often exiled rather than beheaded, those guilty of treason under the early empire died by the axe, or later, the sword. Nevertheless, from the third century onwards, as citizenship was gradually extended to all free residents of the empire (210 CE), decapitation became increasingly common, especially for the middle and higher classes, the *honestiores*. It was applied to both traitors and homicides. It was never, however, part of the arena culture, considered as less shameful than a public death. For the foreigner and the unfree there were five forms of *summa supplicia* – executions: burning, exposure to wild

⁴ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. G.P. Maggioni (Florence: 1998) 1041–1050.

⁵ *The South English Legendary*, ed. C. D'Evelyn – A.J. Mill, 3 vols. (London: 1956–1959) vol. I, 54–58.

beasts (the arena), drowning in a sack with animals (reserved for parricides), crucifixion, and hanging.

All the same, Pecham's answer leaves much to be desired. Apparently aware of Roman methods of execution, Pecham mentioned three of the five methods: fire, wild beasts, and drowning. Crucifixion, naturally, had become unmentionable, and the gallows (*furca*) would have played havoc with his thesis.⁶ After all, the hangman's rope was also wielded by a rational human, a *carnifex*, but martyrs were never shamefully hanged. Whatever the reasons for his selection, the question points to a central trait of Roman punitive death sentence: it usually affected the entire body, but did not trouble to separate the head from the rest of the culprit's anatomy.

I would like to begin my article with this nearly-forgotten fact. While the ancient world was rife with various forms of execution, very few of them were capital in the sense that they killed people by separating head from body. The ancient Germans, said Tacitus, either hanged their criminals for publicity, or buried them in swamps under hurdles, for shame and silence.⁷ In the Greco-Roman tradition, we hear of fires, crucifixions, wild beasts, starving to death, garroting, burning, throwing off rocks – but very little about hanging or beheading, which were the most common forms of execution throughout the high medieval and post-medieval periods. By the fifth century, only two of the classical capital penalties for the non-citizen and the slaves remain in the Theodosian code – the fire and the sack, for parricides. The Theodosian code, it must be remembered, was not a new legislative creation, or even a new organization of legal matter. It was merely the compilation of all legislation from Constantine to Theodosius.⁸ As such, it provides a good summary of late antique punitive practice, which was unquestionably harsher than Classical practice.

⁶ Franchi de'Cavalieri P., "Della furca e della sua sostituzione alla croce nel diritto penale Romano", *Nuovo bulletino di archeologia cristiana* 13 (1907) 63–113.

⁷ 'Distinctio poenarum ex delicto: proditores et transfugas arboribus suspendunt, ignavos et imbelles et corpore infames caeno ac palude, iniecta insuper crate, mergunt. Diversitas supplicii illuc respicit, tamquam scelera ostendi oporteat, dum puniuntur, flagitia abscondi', Cornelius Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. M. Hutton, Loeb series (London and New York: 1914) 149.

⁸ Hunt D., "Christianising the Roman Empire. The Evidence of the Code", in Harries J. – Wood I.N. (eds.), *The Theodosian Code* (Ithaca, N.Y.: 1993) 143–158; Callu J.-P., "Le jardin des supplices au Bas-Empire", in Thomas Y. (ed.), *Du châtement dans la cité: Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique. Table ronde organisée par l'Ecole française de Rome (Novembre, 1982)* (Rome: 1984) 313–359; Grodzynski D., "Tortures mortelles et catégories sociales. Les *summa supplicia* dans le droit romain au III^e et IV^e siècles", in Thomas (ed.), *Supplices corporels* 362–403.

Whether the mythological sack was actually ever used is a question that Florike Egmond has already treated elsewhere.⁹ At the same time, the term *capitalis sententia* as a synonym for execution (type unspecified) is common in the code. The punishment of anybody who dragged a *mater familias* into public for debt, though she has a house which may be confiscated, 'he shall be punished by a capital penalty, or rather he shall be done to death with exquisite tortures amidst the greatest criminals and without any pardon'.¹⁰ Obviously, the term 'capital penalty' meant a death sentence. Whether this was due to its primacy in severity among punishments or to any connection with the head is unclear. The Roman tradition, however, left behind a clear distinction that lasted until the early modern era: of all capital penalties, beheading was the most honorable.

Nevertheless, this is precisely the golden age of martyrological *acta*. All church fathers preached about martyrs, poets wrote *encomia*, and the liturgical calendar coalesced around their feasts, usually the *dies natalis* (death-day) of the saint. This was also the age of the *cephalophoroi* martyrs and their legends. And those late antique sources were the ones to underpin late medieval legendaries such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* and Jean de Mailly's *Gestes et miracles des saints*.¹¹ While the interpretation of each saint changed with time, the details of torture and death varied little. Thus it was that the pesky student who posed the question to John Pecham did find, on the basis of legendaries, that martyrs were more often beheaded than killed by any other means.

We know very little about capital executions between the sixth and the twelfth centuries in the West. Roman law was not particularly relevant in Western judicial practice, but early and high medieval chronicles tell of hanging as one mode of execution from Spain to Scandinavia.¹² As soon

⁹ Egmond F., "The Cock, the Dog, the Serpent and the Monkey. Reception and Transmission of a Roman Punishment, or Historiography as History", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 2 (1995/96) 159–192.

¹⁰ *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, ed. and trans. T. Mommsen, C. Pharr (Princeton: 1952) 22, 1.

¹¹ Jean de Mailly. *Abregé des Gestes et miracles des saints*, trans. A. Dondaine (Paris: 1947).

¹² Examples are too numerous to cite. A quick search through the *Monumenta Germaniae historica* provides thousands of cases of hanging throughout Europe, especially of rebels. For a few examples, see Acerbus Morena, *Historia Frederici I (a. 1161–1164)*, MGH, SS rer. Germ. N.S. 7, 136; Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, MGH SS rer. Germ. 2, Lib. III, cap. 8, 149; *Annales Blandinienses*, MGH SS 5, anno 1225, 30 and anno 1270, 33; Arnoldus Lubecensis, *Chronica Slavorum*, MGH SS rer. Germ. 14, Liber V, cap. 26, 197; see also the letters of Albert Behaim, *Brief- und Memorialbuch*, MGH Epistolae des späten Mittelalters 30, 96.

as criminal records start appearing in the thirteenth century (in England and in Italian cities), we find that executions were predominantly carried out by separating head from body – either totally, in a beheading, or by strangulation of the neck in hanging.¹³ It is important to note though, that before the twelfth century beheading and hanging were only two of several other methods of execution. Neither was the standard mode of execution. The Flemish traitors who killed Count Charles the Good in 1127 were punished in various ways: most were ‘precipitated’ from a tower, one was hung upside-down, head stuck between his legs to better display his genitals, and the main instigator of the murder was crucified on the gallows: ‘His arms were stretched out like a cross on the gibbet and his hands inserted, and his head thrust through the hole of the gibbet, so that the rest of his body [...] would expire by suffocation’.¹⁴ Early Norman-English records speak of blinding, castration, and hanging.¹⁵ In France, hanging is mentioned as early as Carolingian times,¹⁶ but it is only from the late twelfth century onward (until the French Revolution) that hanging became the standard mode of execution, with decapitation reserved for more formal cases, usually involving nobles.

Why did this variety of executions become largely streamlined into two modes of criminal execution? By the thirteenth century, when heretics and witches went to the pyre rather than the gibbet, the reason given was clear: to eradicate all remaining parts of the body. But between the eleventh and the thirteenth century burnings were rare, and secular justice consistently avoided them.

In most human cultures, when authorities wish to put someone to death, the deed is carried out by stopping life at what is considered its center. Public executions were another matter: in many cultures, from

¹³ Most hangings in the Middle Ages, as shown in pictures, would not have allowed a drop sharp enough to break the neck at once. The constant reminders of ‘dancing at the end of the rope’ refer to death struggles of people who were slowly suffocated by the rope. The slow death also explains the miraculous survival of some of the hanged. See Bartlett R., *The Hanged Man. A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: 2004) 42–52.

¹⁴ Galbert of Bruges, *De multro, traditione et occisione Karoli comitis Flandriarum*, ed. J. Rider, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (CCCM) 131 (Turnhout: 1994) 71; 108; 131–132. English translation by J.B. Ross, *The Murder of Charles the Good, Count of Flanders, by Galbert of Bruges* (New York: 1960) 211.

¹⁵ Hyams P.R., *Rancour and Reconciliation in Medieval England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: 2003) passim.

¹⁶ Council of Mainz (847), in *Additamenta ad capitularia regum Franciae orientalis*, ed. A. Boretius and V. Krause, *MGH, Capitularia regum Francorum* 2 (Hannover: 1897) art. 27, 182–183: ‘De his, qui suspenduntur in patibulis’.

China to Aztec Mexico, the ritual of execution was long and symbolic, having more to do with ejection from society than with merely killing. In Christianity, public execution meant severing the soul from the body. But where in the body is the soul located?

The scholastic answer was not quite clear. Plato had placed the soul in the head, Aristotle had located it in the heart. Christian scholastics adopted a more diffuse location. William of Auvergne, who saw the soul as the essence of human entity, insisted that the soul was located in all sensory organs, most of which are in the head.¹⁷ Nevertheless, stipulated Thomas Aquinas, it resided in different forms in different organs. Relying on Augustine, Thomas claimed that in fact the soul resided in the subtler organs of the body.¹⁸ Translated into anatomical terms, this would mean the inner organs and the head. All agreed, however, that the soul was the essence of the human being, and removing it depended upon the destruction of some part of the body in which it resided. In the end it usually involved damaging the center of life. What was the center of the human body where life resided for medieval westerners? As we all know, and as Greeks and Romans knew, stopping the heart and cutting off the head have precisely the same result. But capital executions were not simply about killing. They were about punishing and destroying the identity of the dead. Whether those who carried them out believed in the post-mortem life of the body or not, one of the most common apotropaic methods of dealing with returning dead was to decapitate the body – a clear indication that separating the head from the body ended life absolutely.¹⁹ Could it be concluded that the head became the center of life and, if so, when did that happen? Furthermore, in what circles did such an idea coalesce? Was it intellectuals, physicians, or jurists who established the hierarchy of the human body? Or did poets, painters, and visionaries create the metaphorical center?

In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville had no doubts. While the mind (*mens*), the highest part of the soul, resided in the head and was the source of the nerves, life and wisdom were centered in the heart. 'It is said that the heart of a human being is made first, because it is the seat

¹⁷ Teske R.J., "William of Auvergne's Spiritualist Concept of the Human Being", in Morenzoni F. – Tilliette J.-Y. (eds.), *Autour De Guillaume d'Auvergne (d. 1249)*, Bibliothèque d'Histoire Culturelle du Moyen Âge 2 (Turnhout: 2005) 49–53.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *On Spiritual Creatures (De Spiritualibus Creaturis)*, trans. M.-C. Fitzpatrick, *Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation* 5 (Milwaukee: 1949) 59–64.

¹⁹ Cohen E., *The Crossroads of Justice* (Leiden: 1993) 98–99, 134–145.

of all life and wisdom'.²⁰ This ties the heart closely to the soul, though Isidore does not say so explicitly. He does, however, say that the soul comprises reason, memory, senses, and all that is not corporeal in man.²¹ Does this mean that the heart ruled the body? The heart as source of life, though, came straight from Aristotle and confirmed the heart's supremacy. The latter's *De animalibus* had been translated into Latin by the early thirteenth century, and therein Aristotle, in opposition to Hippocratean and Galenic medicine, centered the entire human existence in the heart. Even the nerves, known to carry sensations and motion, were derived, according to Aristotle, from the heart and not from the brain. Thus, all the functions assigned by medicine to the brain were moved to the heart.²² This view was destined to be espoused by Taddeo Alderotti (1223–1295), though he was in a minority position. Most of the physicians who claimed the supremacy of the heart still left the nervous system in the brain.²³

The Aristotelian view was by no means the only antique perception of the center of life. By Isidore's time, Galen's *Tegni* or *Ars medica* was known in the West in Latin, and Galen actually specified four centers of life in the body: the brain, the heart, the liver, and the testicles.²⁴ In other writings, though, Galen stuck to three vital organs: brain, heart, and liver. This system was destined to last well into the twelfth century, and it fits the idea of noble organs as residence of the soul. The problem of supremacy among the three organs was solved by Avicenna, who declared that the heart was indeed the center of vitality, with both brain and liver receiving their vital virtue from the heart. Averroes went farther, discarding the liver altogether from the vital list. According to him, the proof of

²⁰ 'Primum autem aiunt cor hominis fingi, quod in eo sit et vita omnis et sapientia', Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W.M. Lindsay 2 vols. (Oxford: 1911) vol. XI, 143. English trans., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. S.A. Barney – W.J. Lewis – J.A. Beach – O. Berghof (Cambridge: 2006) 240.

²¹ *Etymologiae* XI, 1.

²² Rocca J., *Galen on the Brain. Anatomical Knowledge and Physiological Speculation in the Second Century A.D.* (Leiden: 2003) 28–30. See also Shogimen T., "Head or Heart? Revisited: Physiology and Political Thought in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", *History of Political Thought* 28 (2007) 220–221; Lloyd G.E.R., "The Empirical Basis of the Physiology of the *Parva Naturalia*," in Lloyd G.E.R. – Owen G.E.L. (eds.), *Aristotle on Mind and the Senses* (Cambridge: 1978) 215–239.

²³ Siraisi N.G., *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils. Two Generations of Italian Medical Learning* (Princeton, N.J.: 1981) 192.

²⁴ Jacquart D., "Coeur ou cerveau? Les hésitations médiévales sur l'origine de la sensation et le choix de Turisanus", *Micrologus* 11 (2003) 74. One must bear in mind that women were also considered to have testicles.

importance was sensory. While Averroes, in the wake of Aristotle, located the source of all senses, the *sensus communis*, in the heart, the functioning senses patently worked from the head. It is possible to find authorities espousing either the primacy of the heart or that of the brain in the Christian world, but the liver had ceased to play a role.²⁵

Parallel to this argument, however, there existed a tradition of neurology going back to the early days of Alexandrian medicine. When Herophilos (early third century BCE) wrote his works on the brain, Egypt had not yet come under Roman domination and dissection was permitted. Thus it was that five hundred years later Galen – who was forbidden to dissect bodies – could cite Herophilos as the main authority on the human brain.²⁶ Though none of the original writings of the period had survived, Galen cited them extensively. According to him, Herophilos was responsible for two main discoveries: first, the nerves – both sensory and motor (the latter going down the spine), and the division into ventricles of the brain. Second, Herophilos was also the first to discover two of the three *meninges* or membranes of the brain, the *dura mater* and the *pia mater*, and the division of the brain into two halves. In short, almost all medieval neurology goes back to Herophilos, and his student Erisistratos, via Galen.²⁷ During the fourth century, first Posidonius, a physician, and later Bishop Nemesius of Emesa (fl. c. 390), constructed the ternary division of the brain with its different locations. On the whole, they ignored Erisistratos (who maintained that these functions resided in the meninges) and reverted to the Herophilan view that the matter of the brain was where all cognitive functions resided.²⁸ These consisted of the fantastic, the rational, and the mnemonic functions. The fantastic, or imaginative function was what perceived, through the senses (especially the eyes) the information of the outside world. It was located in the front of the cranium. The rational function, located in the middle, was in charge of

²⁵ Teske R.J., "William of Auvergne's Spiritualist Concept", For supporters of the head, see *infra*, note 28.

²⁶ Tieleman T., "Dialectic and Science: Galen, Herophilos and Aristotle on Phenomena", in Eijk Ph. J. van der – Horstmanshoff H.F.J. – Schrijvers P.H. (eds.), *Ancient Medicine in its Socio-Cultural Context*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam – Atlanta, GA: 1995) vol. II, 487–494.

²⁷ Staden, *Herophilus* 155–160; Tieleman, "Dialectic and Science"; O'Neill I.V., "Diagrams of the Medieval Brain: A Study in Cerebral Localization", in B. Cassidy (ed.), *Iconography at the Crossroads*, Index of Christian Art Occasional Papers 2 (Princeton, N.J.: 1993) 91–106.

²⁸ Pagel W., "Medieval and Renaissance Contributions to Knowledge of the Brain and its Functions," in Poynter F.N.L. (ed.), *The History and Philosophy of Knowledge of the Brain and its Functions. An Anglo-American Symposium: London, July 15th–17th, 1957* (Oxford: 1958) 95–114; O'Neill, "Diagrams of the Medieval Brain".

analyzing and understanding, while the mnemonic function, located in the cerebellum at the back of the head, was the 'storage house' of what reason determined ought to be preserved.²⁹ Late medieval illustrations moved the *sensus communis* also to the head, in front of the imaginative faculty. The division of faculties was succinctly described by Mondino de'Liuzzi (d. 1326):

The universal order, therefore, is this: the common sense reaches, but does not keep; fantasy keeps, but neither arranges nor composes; the imaginative force arranges and composes, but does not judge, affirm or deny. The cognitive judges, affirms, and denies, but according to different orders prescribed by the estimative or reason, and of this we will speak later.³⁰

As anybody familiar with Aristotle's *De anima* will note, in this tradition the brain, a bodily organ, firmly took over functions belonging to the soul. Worse, it took over the functions of the rational soul, which was supposed, according to Aristotle himself, to belong to no bodily part whatsoever. And yet, despite the great authority that Aristotelian writings carried during the later Middle Ages, there is a long, respectable tradition of physicians, philosophers and encyclopedists who not only assigned animate functions to the brain, but also considered the brain, in consequence, as the locus of life. When examined more closely, the list shows an interesting composition. The supporters of the theory of the brain as the locus of life and soul were not the mainstream scholastics of Paris. Physicians naturally had the choice of rejecting Aristotle in favor of Galen and Arabic medicine, which many of them did. An encyclopedist like Vincent of Beauvais did not work within the framework of a university, but with his own Dominican team. Again, he had the freedom to choose as he wished. Even a "philosopher" like William of Conches was a protégé of the Duke of Normandy and wrote his works for his patron's education. We can thus envision a social division of attitudes. William of Auvergne and Thomas Aquinas at Paris remained deliberately vague about the location of the soul and its connection with life and entity, while thinkers outside the university scholastic system voted for the brain and the Alexandrian tradition imported by Galen.

²⁹ Pagel, "Knowledge of the Brain and its Functions"; Liuzzi M. de, *Anatomia, riprodotta da un codice Bolognese del secolo XIV e volgarizzata nel secolo XV*, ed. L. Sighinolfi (Bologna: 1930) 157.

³⁰ Liuzzi, *Anatomia* 460.

Starting with William of Conches (1140s), the ternary division of the brain became standard, together with the repeated assertions of the brain's supreme nobility.³¹ All physiologists (and these could be either physicians or natural philosophers) agreed that some organs were nobler than others. Internal organs, as a rule, were considered nobler, but among the external ones the head and especially the eyes were most often mentioned. The most emphatic on the subject of the head's nobility and the brain's governance of the body were the two most important encyclopedists of the thirteenth century, Bartholomeus Anglicus (ca. 1203–1272) and Vincent of Beauvais (ca. 1190–1264?):

The brain is the most important and noble of all organs, because it is the material foundation in man, as it uses the rational powers of the soul in order to proceed to actual reality. It is also excellently well positioned because of the eyes, so that a man who is distant from something will be able to see far and progress to other places, for vision gives him a wide perspective.³²

Both of them also took over a simile invented by William of Conches: the front part of the brain was the prow (*prora*) and the back was the stern (*puppis*), as though the brain were a ship. Everybody was familiar with the metaphor of the ship of the state, a metaphor actively used from Cicero to John of Salisbury and beyond. So common and obvious did this metaphor become, that the *gubernator*, or ship's pilot, became a governor. Here, the same metaphor was stretched one stage further, with the brain becoming the ship steering the body. In addition, most of Taddeo Alderotti's students reversed his Aristotelian position, adhering to Galenic neurology.³³

Anatomists of the brain added a great deal more to their descriptions, such as the complexion of each ventricle. Fantasy and imagination were hot and dry, the better to perceive colors, odors, and sounds. Logic was hot and humid, for it needed to 'cook' the information. Memory, naturally,

³¹ William of Conches, *Dragmaticon Philosophiae*, ed. I. Ronca – L. Badia – J. Pujol, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (CCCM) 152 (Turnhout: 1997) chap. 18, 240.

³² 'Cerebrum omnibus aliis membris dignius est, ac nobilis, quia materiale fundamentum est in homine, ut potestas rationalis anime valeat ad actualia procedere. Quod etiam in excellentiori parte positum est oculorum causa, sicut enim homo remotum aliquid discreturus ad altiora loca progreditur, ut latior prospectus visui datur', Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturale* (Douai, Baltazar Bellerus: 1624) Bk. 28, chap. 40.

³³ 'In capite eius omnes sensus apparent. Unum et ipsius anime que consulit corpori quedam immo personam gerit. [...] Caput itque dignius et nobilius est omnibus membri, que regimen est et gubernaculum totius', Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Liber de proprietatibus rerum* (Strassburg, G. Husner: 1505) Bk. 5, chap. 2.

³³ Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti* 192–195.

was cold and dry to keep the input from deteriorating. In short, the entire relationship between soul and body depended upon the brain. While medieval anatomists did argue whether the activity took place in the ventricles of the brain or in the convolutions of the cortex, the intrinsic importance of the brain for perception, analysis, and action remained unchallenged.³⁴

It would be grossly misleading to say that physicians all agreed with the supremacy of the head over the heart. Some, like Pietro d'Abano (ca. 1250–ca. 1316), still maintained that the heart, not the head, was the center of life.³⁵ In fact, the so-called 'head or heart controversy' was not a direct controversy between parties who knew each other's work and responded to it. In the later Middle Ages it dissolved into an uncoordinated list of arbitrary statements, each very carefully contextualized within the study of the specific organ in question. Physicians would state the supremacy of the heart or brain over all other organs when treating the organ in question, and then go on to say something similar within the opposite context. If there ever was a clear dichotomy, it blurred after the twelfth century. Guy de Chauliac (ca. 1300–1368) could, in one and the same work, both name the heart 'as though it were king and lord,' and elsewhere assert that the nerves originated in the brain. Not to be outdone, Mondino de'Liuzzi managed to insert the supremacy of the heart while proving the superior role of the central brain ventricle, instancing the central physical position of the heart within the body as proof of its superiority. The argument was that organs centrally placed within a symmetrical context were nobler, and thus the heart could serve as an example for the middle ventricle.³⁶ Nevertheless, the brain was still assigned all of its traditional Galenic functions. Even encyclopedists who unequivocally stated that the brain was the principal organ of the body spoke volumes about the vital importance of the heart as well, especially as the source of blood.³⁷

All the same, the importance of the head – the top of the body rather than the center – grew significantly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By the first quarter of the fourteenth century, Pietro Turrigiano (d. c. 1319) taught that though the heart was a source of vital heat and the main site of the soul, nothing actually happened until the powers of heat

³⁴ Staden, *Herophilus*, 155–160; Tieleman, "Dialectic and Science"; O'Neill, "Diagrams of the Medieval Brain".

³⁵ Pietro d'Abano, *Conciliator* (Venice, Iunta: 1565; reprint, Padua: 1985) fols. 119v–120v.

³⁶ '[...] tamquam rex et dominus', *Guigonis de Caulhiaco Inventarium sive Chirurgia Magna*, ed. M.R. McVaugh, *Studies in Ancient Medicine*, vol. XIV, 2 (Leiden: 1997) 29, 34; Liuzzi, *Anatomia* 159.

³⁷ Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum naturale*, Bk 28, chap. 60, cols. 2032–2033.

and soul worked from the brain.³⁸ The importance resides precisely in the replacement of the Aristotelian soul, which was the body's form, within the human cranium. Assuming, *pace* Aristotle, that the nerves all started out in the brain, the latter became the origin of the human organism. All movement and all sensation depended upon the nerves – their input into the brain and their output into the spine's motor system. The fact that the sense organs also resided within the head was of crucial importance. The one exception – touch – got short shrift in these descriptions, but eyes, ears, nose, and tongue were minutely described as extensions (via the nerves) of the frontal imaginative part of the brain. Since all information about the universe came into the brain, was analyzed and stored there, and eventually all the motor commands to the body extended from it, it was natural to give the head a position of pre-eminence in the body.

If most senses resided in the head, and so (said some authorities) did the most important parts of the soul, it became easy to conflate soul, head, and the senses. There was a long theological tradition supporting the assertion that the senses belonged to the soul, not the body, a tradition reaching from Augustine to Peter Lombard and beyond.³⁹ Even though pain, belonging to the lowest of the senses – touch – was not located in the head, it was sensed, insisted all theologians, in the soul and not in the body. The ternary division of the brain, assigning memory a specific place, fitted very well with the theories of memory of Augustine and Hugh of Saint Victor.

If we attempt a kind of chronology, hanging and decapitation as legal executions obviously evolved independently from medical or philosophical views of the brain as a center of life. It also remains impossible to prove that judicial practices influenced the sciences. I would like, however, to outline some possible arguments in support of an interconnection. The arguments for the preeminence of the head and the brain in the twelfth century come simultaneously from several different sources. Some of the Salernitan physicians described the brain in almost exactly the same terms as William of Conches and Adalard of Bath.⁴⁰ More importantly, the great thirteenth-century encyclopedists adopted this view. While the readership of medical and philosophical literature was restricted to specific literate and Latinate communities, encyclopedias – to judge from the spread

³⁸ Jacquart, "Coeur ou cerveau?" 84–85.

³⁹ Cohen, *The Modulated Scream* 170–175.

⁴⁰ O'Neill, "Diagrams of the Medieval Brain" 97–98.

of remaining manuscripts and translations – reached a much wider, less professionally restricted audience. Furthermore, hearsay information of medical ideas certainly reached wide urban circles: witness Catherine of Siena, who knew the correct shape of the heart and its function as the mover of blood.⁴¹ Furthermore, political thinkers comparing the state to a body automatically assumed that the head rules the body. As we know, John of Salisbury, another twelfth-century intellectual, was the first to use this analogy.

Heads in general seemed to loom large in thirteenth-century thought as metaphors of rulership. By the thirteenth century, the monster – a baby born with two heads – exercises the mind of Bartholomeus Anglicus,⁴² despite the rarity of the phenomenon. A few decades later, the monster re-surfaced in a question presented to John Pecham (1269). Should such a baby be baptized once or twice? Pecham opted for double baptism, on the grounds that two heads, two necks, and two chests proved that there were two souls.⁴³ Once more, the head was the equivalent of the soul. The two-headed monster easily moved from theological disputation back to political science, when Pope Boniface VIII argued in his bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302) that any two-headed human society (i.e., a society ruled by both pope and king) was a monster.⁴⁴ In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the metaphor had become reality. Society mirrored the human body, and just as a two-headed human was a monster, so was a society ruled by pope and king simultaneously and equally. Both hierarchies ended in a single entity, head or heart. While the purpose of this argument was political, it rebounded to the realm of medicine, strengthening the role of the head as ruler of the human body.

Nevertheless, this is no proof that jurists and legislators were familiar with the preeminence of the brain over the heart as the center of life, or that scholastics considered customary punitive law as an indicator of bodily hierarchies. We are dealing here with connections that can be intermittently traced, but not proven. What I would like to do is take two pieces of writing straddling twelfth-century written and oral culture, and see to what extent the head plays a role. The obvious type of twelfth-century literature is the *chanson de geste*, with the enormous amount of violence that characterizes it. Let us take two well-known *chansons*

⁴¹ Webb H., "Catherine of Siena's Heart", *Speculum* 80 (2005) 804–805.

⁴² Bartholomeus Anglicus, *Liber de proprietatibus rerum* Bk. 5, chap. 2.

⁴³ Pecham, *Quodlibeta Quatuor* 120–121.

⁴⁴ *Corpus iuris canonici*, vol. 2, ed. A.L. Richter (Leipzig: 1839) 1159.

written less than a century apart: the *chanson de Roland*, written around 1090, and the first part of *Raoul de Cambrai*, roughly dated to the second half of the twelfth century.⁴⁵ The two epics, *Roland* and *Raoul I*, are roughly similar in length – 291 stanzas (*laisses*) in *Roland* as compared to 249 in *Raoul I*.

The findings show practically no alteration in poetic usage throughout the twelfth century. *Roland* uses synonyms of 'head' (both *chef* and *teste*) 57 times, *Raoul* 52 times.⁴⁶ A significant difference between the two texts, however, arises with regard to context and meaning of the word. While heads had multiple metaphoric meanings in *Roland*, they become much more physical in *Raoul I*. This may be attributed to the gradual shift in medieval French from *chef* to *teste*. In *Raoul I*, heads are almost always referred to as *testes*, not *chiefs*, and are coupled with a verb indicating their removal (*trancher*, *percer*). In the world of chivalric warfare, the head was the organ of life. Death ensued upon its removal. The symbolic role of the head in poetic parlance, therefore, evinces a clear development during the twelfth century.

This trend was continued and strengthened during the second half of the twelfth century. In *Lancelot, ou le chevalier de la charrette* (composed between 1176 to 1181), Chrétien de Troyes makes it clear that the only way for the hero to deal with evil opponents is by beheading them.⁴⁷

The *chansons de geste* provide us with the missing link between anatomy and legal practice. The change in poetry may also have had practical reasons. We do not know when European warriors (both mounted and foot) changed from leather to chain mail armour, but the latter was clearly established by the middle of the eleventh century, as the Bayeux Tapestry testifies. The new armour was far less vulnerable both to sword and cross-bow arrow, so that killing someone in battle came to mean, in practical terms, finding the joints in the armour. One such vulnerable joint was the neck. True, wealthier warriors wore a coife below their helmets to cover their heads and necks, joining the hauberk. However, again according to the Bayeux Tapestry, many (especially foot-soldiers) wore a plain helmet and a chain-mail hauberk, leaving their necks bare. Under such circumstances, even such ferocious warriors as *Roland* and *Lancelot* would have

⁴⁵ *Raoul de Cambrai*, ed. S. Kay (Oxford: 1991); *Das altfranzösische Rolandslied nach der Oxforder Handschrift*, ed. A. Hilka – G. Rohlfs (Tübingen: 1974).

⁴⁶ Duggan J.J., *A Concordance of the Chanson de Roland* (Columbus: 1969).

⁴⁷ Feinstein S., "Losing Your Head in Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart*", *Arthuriana* 9, 4 (1999) 45–62.

had an easier time dispatching their enemies by beheading than by trying to reach the metal-protected organs of the torso.

It is impossible, however, to determine a clear causal relationship in either direction. What I am arguing for is a gradually growing shared perception of the head as the most important organ for life and identity, which derived from different fields of action and influenced different fields of knowledge.

My position is one of a minority. Recently, Takashi Shogimen has argued that the turning point from head to heart took place in the thirteenth century, with the influx of Aristotelian natural philosophy.⁴⁸ His own findings, listed with painstaking honesty, fail to prove his point. What he found among philosophers and physicians breaks about evenly between the pro-head and the pro-heart party. The one powerful case that he instances – that of Marsilio of Padua – is the atypical case of a republican who saw the assembly of the people, rather than the ruler, as the central organ of the polity. Naturally, he moved the centre of life to what he considered the centre of the body, rather than the unique source of authority. Important as Marsilio is for the history of political thought, his ideas had next to no impact at his time. All other political thinkers, whether pro-papal or pro-monarchic, used either simile during the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth century. Their usage was not adversarial, for none of them was interested in establishing the supremacy of an organ. They wished to use an accepted metaphor in order to make a political point, not to create a new and controversial symbolic construct of the human body.

Beyond the realm of political thought, Heather Webb has even more recently shown the interaction of medical, political, and religious ideas centering round the human heart during the later Middle Ages.⁴⁹ Her work, combining several fields of knowledge and sensation, does not follow an adversarial head-or-heart path. Instead, she stresses the importance of the heart as both a physical and symbolic organ at the time. At the same time, she also brings up the possibility of more than one government center within the politicized human body – a theory that render simple bipolarity nonsensical. Her periodization accords with Shogimen: 'In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, the heart momentarily took over the role as sovereign in political metaphor and

⁴⁸ Shogimen, "Head or Heart? Revisited".

⁴⁹ Webb, *The Medieval Heart*.

in physiology in a significant number of accounts'.⁵⁰ As in Shogimen's case, the truth is far more complex. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there was indeed a great deal of writing about heart and blood, but they concerned mostly Christ's heart and blood. The wound on Christ's side, often likened in women's mystical writing to a vagina, was also seen as his heart. The importance of Christ's heart at the time was connected to the belief that Christ had died of an effusion of blood, not of suffocation. The heart was also central to mystical practices. Several mystical texts speak of emptying one's heart of all terrestrial desires, so that God might fill it. Neither political dominion nor anatomical theories had much to do with this interest in the divine heart.

In sum, the late medieval devotional stress upon the heart affected neither medical opinions, which were divided, nor political ones, equally inconsistent. Not surprisingly, neither affected penal practices. Public executions remained fairly standard until the eighteenth century. If we exclude heresy and witchcraft, which resulted in burning, purely criminal activities still led most often to the gallows. In fact, the lack of influence is to be expected. Despite the impressive amount of scholarship devoted to religiosity and its manifestations in the last few years, mystics were marginal figures, hardly visible enough to influence commonly held opinions of late medieval judicial authorities. Furthermore, the emphasis upon the heart was not, as Isidore had seen it, because it was the seat of either knowledge or wisdom, but because it was the seat of feeling – an *honor*, which would hardly endow it with supremacy in the eyes of jurists. I know of no execution, common or exceptional, in which the victim was trans-fixed through the heart.

In conclusion, I would argue that while the twelfth-century intellectual elite did not necessarily influence judicial procedures, it most certainly mirrored commonly held opinions concerning the head as a centre of human identity. Subsequent centuries did eventually witness more of an emphasis upon the heart, but as a nexus with divinity rather than a ruler of the body, and this emphasis appeared within the context of mystical religiosity, not political theory. If one was to ask why in medieval Europe capital punishment centered usually upon the head, the answer would lead back to twelfth-century ideas and practices rather than to later political theories. Both political metaphors and penal practices were two separate offshoots of a twelfth-century legacy.

⁵⁰ Webb, *The Medieval Heart* 12–13. Interestingly, Webb seems unaware of Shogimen's work.

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SECURING THE SACRED HEAD: CEPHALOPHORY AND RELIC CLAIMS*

Scott B. Montgomery

Armed only with his faith, a nine year old boy by the name of Just faces an advancing army of pagan soldiers sent by the wicked tyrant Rictio-varus. When the soldiers inquire about his identity, the boy replies 'I am a Christian' and is promptly decapitated. Rather than falling dead, as one might reasonably expect even in a saint's *passio*, the boy's body picks up his severed head, offering praise and thanks to Heaven. Not surprisingly, the soldiers flee in terror – beaten by a force more powerful than their swords. The boy's father and uncle emerge from their hiding place to witness the miracle, finding the decapitated body sitting upright, cradling its head in its lap. The young martyr hands his head to his father, instructing him to take it to his mother so that she might kiss it. This fantastic tale, from the *passio* of St. Just of Auxerre, is effective in communicating many central concepts behind the cult of holy relics.¹ As this story provides the

* I seem to have a certain penchant for cephalophores, who have a way of popping up in my work, ever since my doctoral dissertation. To my advisor and mentor, Elizabeth McLachlan, I owe many thanks for her sage guidance in the early stages of my investigation of cephalophory as well as its continuation up to this day. Particular thanks are extended to Barbara Baert and Catrien Santing for masterminding, organizing and executing the magnificent symposium that is the origin of this equally worthy volume. To a person, the participants in this symposium created an exciting and fruitful arena for discussion, exegesis, and inspiration. I am honored and humbled to be in such company. Over the years, I have had the good fortune of benefiting from the wisdom and generosity of many scholars in regard to cephalophores and relic cults. While too many to name, among this august legion of academic brilliance, I would acknowledge in particular for insights regarding the material presented in this article, Paula Gerson, Cynthia Hahn, Thomas Dale, Sally Cornelison, Sarah Blake McHam, Sarah Blick, Rita Tekippe, Laura Gelfand, Erik Inglis, William Clark, Piotr Morawski, Benjamin Brand, Alice Bauer, and doubtless others whose omission here is not due to their lack of scholarly insight, but rather the result of my own deficient memory. Many thanks go to my graduate research assistant – Katherine Rousseau – whose diligence is much appreciated. For assistance with the scanning of images, I thank Erin Cassidy and Heather Seneff. Though they doubtless could not have imagined that I would be working on such things as post-decapatory cranial portage, my parents – Toby and David Montgomery – have always been supportive and encouraging of my various academic quirks. As ever, my wonderful wife – Alice Bauer – and my darling girls – Francesca Isabella, Gabriella Sophia, and Serafina Mirabella – make it all possible and worthwhile and keep me from losing my own head. This is for you, my graces!

¹ "Passio S. Justi pueri", *Acta Sanctorum*, Oct. VIII, 338–340; "Altera passio S. Justi pueri", *Acta Sanctorum*, Oct., VII, 340–342.

culmination of the *vita* of St. Just, it successfully demonstrates his active abilities even in a post-martyrial state. This asserts an ongoing, miraculous potency and concentrates this sacral power in his relics. The power of the relics is dramatically revealed as transcending the body's death. Furthermore, the saint is portrayed as the primary agent in this miraculous assertion of post-mortem potency, instituting the cult of his own relics by commanding that they be sent to his mother for osculatory veneration – the kissing of sacred objects. This miracle therefore not only asserts the *potentia* of the relics by manifesting post-decapatory locution (cephalology), but also determines the locus in which the *praesentia* of these relics is asserted.² Furthermore, proper modes of veneration are dictated in both the command to reverently carry the head and to greet it with pious kisses, suggesting that the father, uncle and mother are to be understood as exemplary figures in the subsequent practice of the saint's relic cult – custodians and *ostensores*.

The most effective visual elaboration of St. Just's tale can be found far from Auxerre in his titular church in the Swiss hamlet of Flums, which claimed to possess his head from the early eleventh century onward. As I have discussed elsewhere, in concert with its context of display, the circa 1488 reliquary bust narrates the dramatic events of the saint's passion, condensing time and space so that the distant events of the saint's martyrdom are brought to life and reenacted in Flums.³ The reliquary bust is unique in that it portrays the saint presenting his head to be kissed – allowing the devotee kissing the relics to identify herself/himself with St. Just's mother [Fig. 1]. The saint thereby is imaged as initiating the cult of his own relics – but now in the new location of Flums. By reenacting the cephalophoric presentation, the reliquary bust refigures and conflates the narrative of the *passio*, so that it takes place in Flums, figuratively expunging Auxerre from the tale and thereby situating the relics and their veneration in their adopted location. Other rival claims to possession of the head of St. Just, such as that made by Einsiedeln, are countered by this visually potent statement of the saint's own agency in establishing his relic cult in Flums.

² These terms are outlined in Brown P., *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: 1981).

³ Montgomery S.B., "*Mittite capud meum... ad matrem meum ut osculetur eum*: The Form and Meaning of the Reliquary Bust of St. Just", *Gesta* 36 (1997) 48–64. The bibliography and interpretation of the Flums material as outlined in this paper are more fully developed in the above-mentioned article.



Fig. 1. *Reliquary Bust of St. Just* (ca. 1488). Silver gilt. Flums, St. Justuskirche, now preserved in Zürich, Schweizerisches Landesmuseum. Photograph by the author.

The example of St. Just underscores the effectiveness of the hagiographic trope of cephalophory in asserting the presence and power of a saint's relics. Cephalophory (post-decapitation ambulation) and cephalology (post-decapitation locution), as presented in the *passio* of St. Just, highlight both the effectiveness of the relics and the saint's selection of the locus of his cult. By translating his or her own head (and by extension, the rest of the body) to a self-ordained location, a cephalophoric saint selects the spot at which he or she wishes to be buried and venerated. In doing so, the cephalophore essentially initiates and localizes the cult of his or her own relics. Thus, the hagiographic trope of cephalophory, and the related miracle of cephalology, do more than provide a dramatic tale of martyrdom. They concentrate attention on the cult of the saint's relics by revealing the power of the relics, the location at which they may be found, and the manner of their veneration. To be sure, other narrative tropes serve to assert the presence of relics, such as the inability to remove them from or transport them beyond a particular location. One such example appears in St. Just's legend as the head subsequently becomes immovable beyond the boundaries of the parish of Flums, to which it had been translated from its original resting place in distant Auxerre. Just as the possibility of cranial translocation is established by the miraculous cephalophory outlined in the *passio*, the limits of this relocation are defined by the inability to move the relics from the location of its enshrinement. The two miracles are related – essentially establishing the confines of the legitimacy of the relic claim by illustrating saintly mandate. In conjunction with the eleventh-century translation of the relic, the tale of cephalophory is appropriated from its original locale of Auxerre and adamantly developed in Flums so as to assert the saintly proclamation that Flums is his chosen home (or at least that of his head). Around the time of the creation of the reliquary bust, an image of the saint holding his head was painted on the keystone of the apse of the St. Justuskirche (circa 1452–88) [Fig. 2]. This image works in concert with the reliquary bust to fashion a spatial and temporal matrix in which the culmination of the saint's cephalophoric (and cephalologic) mandate is allowed to be re-enacted in the head's adopted location in this very church. In his *passio*, St. Just's head asserts that his mother should venerate the relic by kissing it, and then look to heaven to see him. During ostensions of the head of St. Just in Flums (inside its cephalophoric reliquary bust), the devotee would kneel and kiss the head proffered by the reliquary bust resting on the altar. From this vantage point, one could then look up to see the image of the saint 'in heaven' in the vault of the choir. This performed



Fig. 2. Unknown artist, *St. Just* (ca. 1452–88). Painting on vault keystone. Flums, St. Justuskirche, apse. Photograph by the author.

devotion, guided by the two cephalophoric images, essentially brings the initial veneration of the saint's relics into the perpetual here-and-now in Flums. The relic is thus both proclaimed and performed as authentic.

As the example of St. Just in Flums suggests, the trope of cephalophory appears to relate most cogently to claims for the possession and effectiveness of relics. By extension, cephalophoric imagery could be effectively used to promote pilgrimage in that it both visually localizes the saint's relics (establishing *praesentia*) and reveals their miraculous power (demonstrating *potentia*). In offering his head to the faithful for osculatory veneration, the cephalophoric reliquary bust of St. Just conflates the presentation of the head to Just's mother and the display of the head to the faithful in Flums. This narrative and performative conflation facilitates the notion that the saint not only commands that his relics be venerated, but that they are to be thus honored specifically in Flums. As this reliquary bust dramatically illustrates, images of the hagiographic trope of cephalophory are extremely effective in offering the viewer palpable visual (and even tactile and performative) assurance that the relics are present, as the saint himself is shown as the agent of this action. As seen at Flums, the trope is frequently used specifically to counter rival claims to possession of the same relic.

It is therefore hardly surprising that post-decapitation self-propulsion and head portage is a relatively common occurrence in medieval hagiography, as evidence by the one hundred and twenty-two examples cited in Santyves' 1929 study on the trope, as well as additional examples that have since been brought to light.⁴ Despite the frequency of the cephalophoric miracle in texts of saints' *passiones*, the phenomenon itself has not been fully addressed in the manner that I am proposing here, in terms of its role in relic claims.⁵ The relationship between the miraculous trope and the selection of the location of shrines is generally well-established, but further work needs to be carried out in terms of how and where texts and images were utilized to assert and update such claims.

Post-decollation cranial portage provides a dramatically narrative demonstration of a saint's continuing power. The agency in such actions boldly illustrates the notion of *Imitatio Christi* in terms of the saint's triumph over death. As Christ is the active agent in His Resurrection, so too the saint plays a dominant role in these post-mortem ambulations. This emphasizes the way in which a saint's relics possess a certain parallel with the consecrated Host – the body of Christ. Both the Host and relics possess equal potency even in fragmentary states, via the notion of *pars*

⁴ Santyves P., "Les saints céphalophores. Étude de folklore hagiographique", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 99 (1929) 158–231.

⁵ Additional studies on cephalophory include. Cahier Ch., *Caractéristiques des saints dans l'art populaire*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1867), vol. I, 761–767; Hébert M., *Les martyrs céphalophores Eucharie, Elophe et Libaire* (Brussels: 1914); Stückelberg E.A., "Die Kephalphoren", *Anzeiger für schweizerische Altertumskunde*, N.F., 18 (1916) 75–79; Delahaye H., *Cinq leçons sur la méthode hagiographique*, Subsidia Hagiographica 21 (Brussels: 1934) esp. 135–138; Gessler J.Fr., "De HH. Cefaloforen. Een onderzoek naar den Oorsprong van Deze Legende en het ontstaan der Cefaloforenbeelden", *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art* 11 (1941) 193–212; Moretus de Plantin H., *Les passions de Saint Lucien et leurs derives céphalophoriques* (Namur: 1953) 53–61; Coens M., "La plus ancienne Passion de S. Laurian, martyr céphalophore en Berry", *Analecta Bollandiana* 82 (1964) 57–86; Oury G.-M., "Un saint céphalophore de Touraine? Saint Quentin", *Analecta Bollandiana* 97 (1979) 289–300; Gabet P., "Recherches sur les saintes 'céphalophes'", *Mélanges de Mythologie Française, offerts au Président-fondateur Henri Dontenville* (Paris: 1980) 105–134; Colledge E. – Marler J.C., "'Céphalogie': A Recurring Theme in Classical and Medieval Lore", *Traditio* 37 (1981) 411–426; Gabet P., "La Céphalophorie", *Bulletin de la Société de Mythologie Française* 140 (January–March 1986) 2–23; Gabet P., "Les céphalophores Champenois et Bourguignons, une Famille Méconnue", *Bulletin de la Société de Mythologie Française* 143 (October–December 1986) 52–55; Halm-Tisserant M., "Céphalophorie", *BABESCH-Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* 64 (1989) 100–113; Thomas J., "Sur l'origine de la céphalophorie, 'signe évident d'une suivre de l'être'", in Uytfanghe M. van – Demeulenaere R. (eds.), *Aevum Inter Utrumque. Mélanges offerts Gabriel Sanders, professeur émérite à l'Université de Gand* (Steenbrugis: 1991) 401–408; Grégoire R., "I santi cefalofori", *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiana* 10, 1 (2006) 5–12; Taverna D., "Têtes coupées e cefalofori in Piedmonte", *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiana* 13, 2 (2009) 109–130.

pro toto (the part implies the whole). Just as Christ is held to be fully present in every consecrated host, so to the fragmented body of the saint possesses the total presence and potency of the living saint. In being able to self-translate after death, the saint manifests his/her ability to effect miracles of all manner. For, just as Christ's raising of Lazarus is His most profoundly supernatural miracle, so too is the saint's ability to essentially self-resurrect (albeit for a short time). If this can be done, surely any manner of miracle is possible via the action of these same relics. Most important in terms of the cephalophoric trope is the fact that the saint is presented as actively controlling his/her own relics and even initiating the cult of these relics. In carrying the sacred head, the body essentially acts as its own relic custodian – its own reliquary – as the saint's bodily relics literally serve (and carry) themselves. It is a brilliantly self-affirming action, as relics are activated in a manner that accentuates their miraculous potential. The relics are real because they are validated by themselves through the act of self-translation to a chosen site for their veneration.

The miracle of cephalophory clearly enjoyed such popularity because of its effectiveness in asserting relic claims. It proved power and concentrated it in specifically material objects – relics – that could be custoded and effectively employed for a variety of reasons.⁶ Not surprisingly, the literary trope of cephalophory appears to have developed during the central Middle Ages – a period that witnessed the spread of relic cults and the dissemination of relics across the map of Europe. The earliest extant texts of the *passiones* of St. Denis and St. Just, both dating from the Eighth Century, include some of the earliest examples of both cephalophory and cephalology.⁷

⁶ The bibliography on relic cults and the various uses of relics/reliquaries is immense. Among this vast array of sources, see: Hermann-Mascard N., *Les reliques des saints. Formation coutumière d'un droit* (Paris: 1975); Geary P.J., *Furta Sacra. Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: 1978); Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*; Vauchez A., *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge: 1997) [originally published as *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge* (Rome: 1988)]; Geary P.J., *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca–London: 1994); Montgomery S.B., *The Use and Perception of Reliquary Busts in the Late Middle Ages* (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University: 1996).

⁷ Coens M., "Aux origines de la céphalophorie. Un fragment retrouvé d'une ancienne passion de S. Just, martyr de Beauvais", *Analecta Bollandiana* 74 (1956) 86–114; Coens M., "Nouvelles recherches sur un thème hagiographique: la céphalophorie", *Recueil d'études bollandiennes*, Ser. Subsidia Hagiographica 37 (Brussels: 1963) 9–31. Maurilio Adriani suggests that the inclusion of the miracle in the *passio* of St. Minias may have been inspired by, and consciously borrowed from, that of St. Denis due to its success in fashioning a potent argument for both the potency and location of holy patronage, Adriani M., *Firenze sacra* (Florence: 1990) 12.

Significantly, this coincides with the first major wave of international translations of holy relics.⁸

Numerous iconographic and causal explanations have been offered for the origin of the cephalophoric trope, but none of them is fully convincing within the parameters and practices of medieval saints' cults. Its origin has been posited as resultant from the discovery of ancient burial sites in which the head was placed on the chest or in the hands of the deceased.⁹ While possible, this does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the popularity of cephalophory, nor does it accord with the broad geographic distribution of the legend, with notable examples occurring in France, Italy, England, Spain, and Germany, among other regions. Though the suggestion that the trope of cephalophory stemmed from such a simplistic misreading of ancient burial customs could theoretically be applied in terms of the establishment of the concept, this theory is grounded on the assumption that the trope was essentially a passive development in response to archaeological evidence. To be sure, instances exist in which the discovery of new archaeological evidence engendered a reinterpretation of the saint's *legenda*, most dramatically so with the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne, as I have articulated elsewhere.¹⁰ However, this suggested phenomenon provides an unsatisfactory rationale for the popularity of the cephalophoric trope, in that it does not take into account the agency of relic claims in the introduction of the miracle into the saints' *legendae*. As it is widely recognized that the development and metamorphosis of saints' cults are generally the result of conscious campaigns to construct notions of power, authority, and control, it only seems logical to pursue the investigation of the origins of cephalophory within these same acknowledged parameters of hagiographic study. Thus, rather than assuming a passive voice for the cephalophoric miracle, we ought to invert this equation and posit an active directive for the introduction of the trope into a saint's *passio*. The miracle is inserted into the saint's *passio* precisely to assert the saint's approval, and even initiation, of his/her relic cult. This is not a passive result of the interpretation of archeological finds, but rather a conscious statement of saintly agency and post-mortem miraculous potency. Just as cephalophoric saints are adamantly

⁸ See Geary, *Furta Sacra*.

⁹ Taverna, "Têtes coupées e cefalofori" offers some discussion of this, esp. 110ff.

¹⁰ Montgomery S.B., *Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne. Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe* (Whitney: 2009) esp. chap. II. The extensive bibliography of the cult of the 11,000 Virgins and their legend is referenced in this book.

active agents in this post-mortem ambulation, so too is the miracle's textual origin. Cephalophores do not merely respond to their decapitation, but more actively direct the location of their resting place and subsequent veneration, establishing the *locus sanctus* of their cult. Not surprisingly, it seems that the trope is commonly inserted into the saint's tale by those claiming to possess these relics.

It has also been suggested that the trope resulted from misinterpretation of portrayals of saints holding their heads in their hands, but this too is problematic, as no images of this type are known to predate the earliest textual manifestations of cephalophory, such as the cases of St. Denis and St. Just.¹¹ Were this not the case, such an interpretive error might provide a plausible explanation. While the relative chronology of text and image in the development of the notion of cephalophory might suggest that we search for textual sources as the primary directives, I posit that such a model places too much emphasis on the role of texts.¹² Fortunately much recent research in the history of art and hagiography has revealed a more complex, nuanced, and performative arena for the development of saints' cults. This suggests that both textual and visual manifestations of cephalophory developed as hagiographic propaganda, asserting aspects of the cultic core of relic claims and the varied practices of their veneration. This is supported by the frequency with which texts and images of cephalophory are fashioned at the site wherein their relics are kept. Examples proliferate, including the tale of St. Minias at his titular church in Florence (discussed below) and the ninth-century Chartrain *Vita Carauni* which recounts how the cephalophoric body of St. Chéron was discovered by his companions at Chartres, precisely where his relics were enshrined.¹³ The close relationship between various passions of cephalophoric saints suggests that the trope proliferated via a process of conscious modeling of these saints upon one another.¹⁴ The most immediate reason for this practice seems to

¹¹ See: Santyves, "Les saints céphalophores" 165–166; Thomas "Sur l'origine de la céphalophorie" 402. Réau L., *Iconographie de l'art Chrétien* (Paris: 1958) 285ff.

¹² Regarding the emphasis on textual sources as the point of inception of the trope of cephalophory, see: Thomas, "Sur l'origine de la céphalophorie" 402ff.; Saintyves, "Les saints céphalophores" 164; Delahaye, *Cinq leçons sur la méthode hagiographique* 136; Coens, "Aux origins de la céphalophorie" 112; Moretus de Plantin, *Les passions de Saint Lucien* 54.

¹³ See: Gabet, "La Céphalophorie" 3ff.; Villette A.G., "St Chéron des Champs", *Bulletin de la Société de Mythologie Française* 109 (April–June 1978) 50–59 and 110 (July–September 1978) 79–100. The early thirteenth-century south porch of Chartres includes a rare image of St. Chéron as cephalophore among the reliefs on the portal of the martyrs, visually supporting the textual claim to the possession of his relics.

¹⁴ This is nicely adressed by Gabet, "La Céphalophorie" 4ff.

have been the very effectiveness of the tale in establishing relic claims at the very location where the tale was inserted into the saint's *vita*.

As a demonstration of the power beyond death, cephalophory is paralleled by its sibling miracle of cephalology, or speaking heads, as seen in the *passio* of St. Just. The most cogent Christian prototype would be the speaking head of St. Paul, which uttered the name of Christ immediately after decollation, as Jacobus de Voragine recounts: 'As soon as his head bounded from his body, it intoned in Hebrew and in a clear voice, "Jesus Christ" [...].'¹⁵ To be sure, much of the potency of the trope is fed by the phenomenon, often repeated in saints' *passiones*, that the martyr is only dispatched by beheading after enduring a series of horrific tortures, as seen in the *passio* of St. Minias. The very frequency of this successful means of martyr-dispatching suggests that decapitation is definitive. Therefore, the act of post-decapatory ambulation (and occasionally locution) is underscored as all-the-more miraculous. Cephalophores dramatically enact their *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio sancti* in 'surviving' bodily death, essentially following the model of St. Paul in professing faith after decollation. It provides a trope of saintly emulation of Christ's own Resurrection, but does so with a very specific focus on the movement of physical relics and the mandate to enshrine them.

While pre-Christian sources, such as the head of Orpheus, the head of Bran, and the Celtic cult of the head in general, are indeed striking in their paralleling of cephalophoric tendencies, and may have provided inspiration or models for the idea, they do not seem to have been major factors in the popularity of the cephalophoric trope.¹⁶ To be sure, the ability of a severed head to speak (cephalology) and perform additional life-like actions can be found in these pre-Christian tales. Such supernatural

¹⁵ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend. Readings on the Saints*, ed. W.G. Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: 1993) 353–354.

¹⁶ Regarding the parallel with the speaking heads of Orpheus and Bran, as well as that of the giant in Gawain and the Green Knight, see: Williams D., *Deformed Discourse. The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: 1996) esp. 135, 299, 301–2; White B., "A Persistent Paradox" *Folklore* 83, 2 (Summer 1972) 122–131. On the Celtic cult of the head in this regard, see Taverna, "Têtes coupées e cefalofori". For a good discussion of precedents, see: Halm-Tisserant, "Cephalophorie". The tale of the singing severed head of Orpheus is primarily known from Book 11 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as numerous vase paintings and sculptural fragments. On the head of Orpheus, see: Guthrie W.K.C., *Orpheus and Greek Religion. A Study of the Orphic Movement* (Princeton: 1993) esp. 35–36; Marlow A.N., "Orpheus in Ancient Literature", *Music & Letters* 35 (1954) 361–369, esp. 365; Nagy J.F., "Hierarchy, Heroes, and Heads: Indo-European Structures in Greek Myths", in Lowell Edmunds (ed.) *Approaches to Greek Mythology* (Baltimore: 1990) 200–238, esp. 210–214.

occurrences clearly indicate a power beyond death – a potency with which the head is particularly imbued. This emphasis on the head as locus of identity (and therefore agency) is as old as the art of portraiture itself. But, beyond the basic formal and conceptual parallels between the valuation (and veneration) of the special head, there seems to be little overlap in terms of Christian cephalophoric miracles and those of the pre-Christian world. Cephalophory is most explicitly tied to the Christian cult of relics. Simonetti suggests that the trope of cephalophory was instrumental in the development of hagiography in the transition from pagan antiquity to Christianity in the early Middle Ages.¹⁷ Certainly, these historic predecessors emphasize the importance of the head in localizing identity, and therefore underscore the rationale for the potency of cranial portage in fixing both the locus and potency of relic presence. However, such a model, based on a relatively formulaic adoption of these pre-Christian sources, does not prove satisfactory in elucidating how the cephalophoric trope operates within the performance and perception of saints' cults. These pre-Christian antecedents therefore provide essentially formal rather than functional parallels with no real evidence of conjunction.¹⁸ Furthermore, Simonetti's assertion that the trope became outmoded once this transition to Christianity was fully effected is unconvincing in that it does not take into account the relatively late invention and development of cephalophory in saints' *passiones*, apparently during the Eighth Century, and the subsequent proliferation of images and *passiones* of cephalophores during the Twelfth through Fifteenth Centuries. As noted, the rise and expansion of cephalophory as a hagiographic trope is concordant with crucial periods in the expansion of relic cults and its attendant *inventiones* and *translationes* of holy relics, suggesting a causal relationship.¹⁹

¹⁷ Simonetti A., "Santi cefaloforesi altomedievali", *Studi medievali* (3 ser.) 28 (1987) 67–121.

¹⁸ It is here that I largely disagree with Williams, *Deformed Discourse* 307, who investigates the phenomenon under a broader consideration of 'monstrosities'. In focusing on cephalophory as but another example of medieval constructions of the monstrous, Williams seems to miss the more specific functioning of the trope in regard to relic cults. For example, he cites the cephalophory of St. Denis as 'an amorphosis through which we perceive divinity through distortion'. While I agree that an inversion of order is in play here, and that it ultimately serves to advance a sense of the power of God, it seems most pointed in its validation of relics. Doubtless, Williams is correct in noting the resonance of cephalophory as a fantastic or even monstrously inverted miracle, but the impetus to the creation and proliferation of the trope is not really considered in this regard.

¹⁹ Regarding the increased translation of relics during this time, see in particular Geary, *Furta Sacra*.

As I and others have noted, the tale of cephalophory most directly and emphatically relates to the cult of relics – and it is here that we should look to explain both its origins and proliferation. If we explore the logic of the trope and its usefulness in asserting relic cults and relic claims, we can begin to understand it within its intended context of devotion. Seen in this light, cephalophory is not a textual import or misinterpretation, but rather a brilliantly effective means of underscoring the sacral power and presence of relics. The tale worked in concert with related images to manifest and make palpably real the accepted truths of relic cults. It both explicated and localized the sacred potency of relics. As the case of St. Just at Flums reveals, the tale of cephalophory could be effectively molded to fit different contexts and used to assert specific relic claims. Image, text, and ritualized devotion worked together to conflate time and space – bringing the miracle of the saint's cephalophoric initiation of the cult of his relics into the present performance of ritualized veneration in the town of Flums.

Another striking example of the use of cephalophory, in both textual and visual modes, in the assertion of relic claims can be seen in the church of San Miniato al Monte in Florence.²⁰ In 1013, Bishop Hildebrand of Florence uncovered the relics of the third-century Florentine martyr Minias on the Monte Fiorentino to the south of the city. Concurrent with the construction of a new church on the site, the bishop ordered abbot Drogone to compose a new *vita* for the saint. Drogone introduced the tale of cephalophory into this new *passio sancti Miniatis martyris*.²¹ According to this legend, after being decapitated in the amphitheatre in town, Minias picked up his severed head and carried it across the Arno and up the hill to the spot where Hildebrand found him seven and a half centuries later. This miraculous post-decapitation ambulation not only demonstrates the saint's triumph over death, and thereby the ongoing potency of his relics, it also dramatically casts the narrative of his passion as an *imitatio Christi*, not only in the triumph over death, but also in the ability to locomote over water. The text continues, asserting that by this act, the saint made manifest his desire to remain on the spot until the Day of Judgment:

²⁰ Montgomery S.B., "Quia venerabile corpus redicti martyris ibi repositum: Image and Relic in the Decorative Program of San Miniato al Monte", in Cornelison S.J. – Montgomery S.B. (eds.), *Images, Relics and Devotional Practices in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Tempe: 2005) 7–25. The bibliography and interpretation outlined in this paper are more fully elaborated in the above-mentioned article.

²¹ *Passio Sancti Miniatus Martyris*, in *Acta Sanctorum* Octobris IX (Antwerp: 1864) 428–430.

They cut off his sacred head, with happy destiny allowing him to pass from mortality into immortality. The body of the blessed martyr, raising itself from the ground, took its head in its sacred hands, and, accompanied by a cortège of angels, climbed the mountain where, prior to his passion, he had been a hermit of God. And thus with clear and admirable intention he proved that he wished to await the Day of Judgment here.²²

The inclusion of the cephalophory and the adamant assertion that the saint desired to remain in Florence provides a miraculous stamp of authenticity to the Florentine relics. This appears to be a direct response to a rival claim for the relics, which asserted that Bishop Theodoric of Metz had removed them in 967. The fortuitous *inventio* of the relics by Bishop Hildebrand in 1013 raised the question of which city possessed the true relics. The tale of cephalophory, conveniently devised at this time and inserted into the new *passio*, provided a definite answer to the question. The relics undoubtedly remained in Florence because the saint himself had miraculously established his permanent residence there.

Over the next several centuries, the Florentines engaged in an ongoing campaign to assert the presence of Minias, through word and image. The first stage in this campaign involved the concurrent construction of the saint's *vita* and titular church. The cephalophoric tale and the church work together to clearly establish the ongoing presence of St. Minias in Florence. The text reveals that the saint initiated the cult of his relics on the site where he wished to remain until the Last Judgment. The church provides the *locus sanctus*, framing the ritual center of that cult – the relics in the crypt. The second phase of this campaign, carried out in the thirteenth century, involved the creation of a monumental decorative scheme to reinforce this idea. To this end, lavish mosaics were added to the façade and apse, showing St. Minias standing next to Christ at the Day of Judgment, replacing the Baptist in a modified *Deisis* image.²³ The implication

²² 'Ac sanctissimo capite amputato, ex mortalibus ad immortalia beata sorte pervenire meretur. Corpus vero beatissimi martyris, de loco se elevans decollationis: caputque abscissum, sacris brachiis amplectens: montis verticum, in quo ante passione suam, omnipotenti Deo servire consueverat, angelico cum comitatu ascendit: ibique se ultimum examinis diem prestolari velle mirandis evidentissimisque iudicijs declaravit' (translation mine); Busignani A. – Bencini R., *Le chiese di Firenze. Quartiere di Santo Spirito* (Florence: 1974) 217; Moretti I. – Stopani R., *Toscana Romana* (Florence: 1982) 221.

²³ The *Deisis* image, originating from Byzantium, is a portrayal of Christ enthroned in majesty, flanked by the Virgin Mary to the left (Christ's right – the place of honor) and John the Baptist to the right (Christ's left). Such an image provides a vision of Christ as God that is contextualized within sacred history though the prophetic tradition (Hebrew Bible), personified by John the Baptist, and the Church as personified by the Virgin Mary (*Maria Ecclesia*).

is clear. Echoing the words of Drogone's *passio sancti Miniatis martyris*, the saint is presented as remaining on the site until the Last Judgment. Thus, while not specifically portraying the cephalophoric episode of the saint's *passio*, these mosaics present the eschatological conclusion of his residence on the Monte Fiorentino, which began with him carrying his head up the hill. The façade's iconic assertion of Minias' ongoing presence is expanded in the apse mosaic, dated 1297, which reiterates the *Deisis* motif, now identifying Minias by name and portraying him presenting a lavish crown to Christ, as though serving as a visual stand-in for his severed head. As the apse mosaic frames the view to the altar, it reinforces the message of Minias' *imitatio Christi*, and draws this parallel inside the church, iconographically linking façade and apse.

The final and most forceful visual argument for the ongoing presence of St. Minias in Florence was made by Jacopo da Casentino's altarpiece of St. Minias, created in the 1330's for the relic altar in the crypt of San Miniato al Monte [Fig. 3]. The saint is shown standing above his altar-tomb, specifically asserting his presence on that site. He is flanked by eight scenes of his torture, with the penultimate episode portraying his martyrdom by decapitation. Most significant is the final scene depicting the saint's cephalophoric stroll up the Monte Fiorentino, bringing his head to the very spot where the altarpiece and relics rest. In closing with the dramatic act of cephalophory, the altarpiece asserts that the relics are present, as the saint himself is portrayed as the agent of this action. The articulation of Minias' cephalophoric miracle in the altarpiece connects spatially with the apse mosaic above, as one illustrates the terrestrial cranial portage while the other reveals its Heavenly (and temporal) conclusion. From altarpiece to apse mosaic to façade mosaic, the decorative complex asserts the presence of the relics in the altar in the crypt, and extends this upward to the liturgical focus of the basilica and outward over the city. The altarpiece, the monumental mosaic decoration, and the text of the *passio* work in concert, utilizing the trope of cephalophory to assert the presence of St. Minias' relics in his titular church in Florence. As in the tale of the miracle itself, the image of cephalophory is thus projected in time and space, as one must move through both in order to fully grasp the significance of the tale.

As illustrated by the examples of St. Just in Flums and St. Minias in Florence, the relationship between cephalophoric imagery and relic claims is not limited to a specific region. Additionally, in both of these cases, temporal and topographic conflations facilitate the potency of the cephalophoric miracle in its ultimate goal of legitimizing claims to the possession of holy bones. These investigations of cephalophoric imagery produced in



Fig. 3. Jacopo del Casentino, *St. Minias Altarpiece* (1330). Tempera on panel. Florence, San Miniato al Monte. Photograph by the author.

several locales reveals certain consistent tendencies in regard to the application of the miracle which seem to connect the assertion of relic claims with the exploitation of the trope. This has led me to consider the claim of possession of relics to be the primary impetus behind the development and proliferation of the hagiographic trope of cephalophory. To my mind, this accords with the phenomenological core of saints' cults, which is the perception of the potency of saints as intercessors and the notion that this power is most palpably localized in their holy relics. As in the case of San Miniato al Monte, it can be suggested that the assertion of relic possession drove the decisions regarding the production of the updated *passio*, as well as the construction and monumental decoration of the new church. In positing this causality, I am essentially inverting the standard scholarly practice of reading backward from text and image, looking for clarification in the practices of saints' cults. In contradistinction to this investigative model, I propose that we work outward from the dynamic and potent core of the cult of the saints, as seems to have been the working practice of those who fashioned these very cults, tales, and portrayals. If texts and images frequently serve to flesh out the holy bones, should we not endeavor to follow this same relationship in our scholarly investigation of the machinations of saints' cults? I believe that additional study of the cults and attendant visual culture of other cephalophores may yield similar results, further supporting this theory that claims of relic possession are behind this trope. In doing so, we may also shed light on the ways in which these cults were formulated, practiced and perceived.

An examination of many other cephalophoric cults reveals that the examples of St. Just and St. Minias are not unusual in their use of the trope of cephalophory to assert relic claims. A brief overview of a few additional examples illustrates the common link between claims to relic possession and the fashioning of cephalophoric images and texts. San Miniato al Monte illustrates the common aspect of the cephalophoric miracle that has the saint transporting the severed head, and often the body, to the very spot at which it was subsequently venerated. Similarly, St. Aphrodisius, first Bishop of Béziers was decapitated on the site of the Roman circus and his head was tossed into a well. It was miraculously cast out of the well and Aphrodisius' body picked it up and carried it through the city, depositing it at the site of his cave hermitage.²⁴ In time a chapel

²⁴ See: Guérin P., *Les Petits Bollandistes. Vies des Saints* (Paris: 1876), vol. V, 61; Usuardus Monachus, *Le Martyrologe d'Usuard* (Brussels: 1965) 165; Cobham Brewer E., *A Dictionary*

dedicated to Saint Peter was erected upon the site, which was later replaced by the larger church of Saint-Aphrodise in Béziers.²⁵ Not only does the tale underscore the saint's agency in selecting the locus for his veneration, his cephalophoric stroll through the city seems to foreshadow processional displays that would further assert his active presence. As in the case of the reliquary bust of St. Just in Flums, the tale of Aphrodisius' cephalophory expands both temporally and geographically so as to render the distant hagiographic miracle relevant in the here-and-now. The fulcrum upon which this conflation of time and space turns is the presence of his relics.

In Zürich, the siblings Felix and Regula were executed near the banks of the Limmat and carried their heads up the hill to the site of their burial.²⁶ The legend of this late antique miracle can be traced to the second half of the eighth century at which time it was recorded by Florentius – a monk of the Grossmünster, which conveniently marked the site of their self-ordained burial.²⁷ The *passio* concludes with the saints' decapitation and cephalophory: "Their blessed bodies took their heads in their hands and carried them from the banks of the river Limmat, where they were martyred, and climbed 40 dextri up the hill. On this site, where the saints (relics) remained with great ornament, 200 dextri from the Castro Turico, since days of old, many blind and crippled were cured to the glory of God and the holy martyrs'. Their post-decapatory ascent to the site, illustrated in the circa 1130 *Stuttgarter Passionale*, is the subject of the earliest known depiction of their *vita* and *passio*.²⁸ As in the passion of

of *Miracles. Imitative, Realistic, and Dogmatic* (London: 1901) 167; Julia H., *Histoire de Béziers, ou Recherches sur la province de Languedoc* (Paris: 1845) 178–180.

²⁵ On the church, see: Coste A., *Saint Aphrodise, apôtre de Béziers, et son église à travers les âges* (Béziers: 1899).

²⁶ See: Etter H.F. – Bauer U. – Hanser J. – Schneider J.E., *Die Zürcher Stadtheiligen Felix und Regula. Legenden, Reliquien, Geschichte und ihre Botschaft im Licht moderner Forschung* (Zurich: 1988); Ramer C., "Felix, Regula und Exuperantius: Ikonographie der Stifts- und Stadtheiligen Zürichs", *Mitteilungen der Antiquarischen Gesellschaft in Zürich* 47 (1973) 5–40.

²⁷ 'Acciperunt beatissima corpora eorum sua capita in minibus suis de ripa fluminis Lidimaci, ubi martyrio acciperunt, portantes ea contra montem illum dextros XL. Est autem locis ille, ubi sancti cum mango decore requiescunt, a castro Turico dextrose CC, ubi ab antiquitate multi ceci et cludi ad gloriam Dei et sanctorum martyrum reuerencia sanati sunt' (translation mine). See: Etter e.a., *Die Zürcher Stadtheiligen Felix und Regula* 18; Müller I., "Die frühkarolingische Passio der Zürcher Heiligen", *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Kirchengeschichte* 65 (1971) 132–187.

²⁸ Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Bibl. Fol. 56. Illustrated in Etter et al., *Die Zürcher Stadtheiligen Felix und Regula* 17.

St. Minias, the saints are subjected to a series of tortures, such as being boiled in oil, before they are beheaded. The litany of tortures sets up the saints' stalwart and unwavering faith, while the ensuing decapitation sets the stage for the cephalophoric miracle that illustrates the post-mortem potency of the saints' holy bodies and their agency in determining the site of their enshrinement, veneration, and miraculous thaumaturgies. Thus, these fourth-century martyrs are cast as cephalophores following the eighth-century *inventio* of their relics in an effort to assert the Grossmünster's claim to possess the relics, while imagery and ritual procession illustrated and reenacted these events from the twelfth century onward. The legend's attribution of the discovery of the martyrs' bodies to Charlemagne links the tale of the city's patronal relics to Zürich's standing as a free city within the Empire and even to the founding of the Grossmünster by Charlemagne himself – all underscoring the importance of the relics in the city's civic self-identity.²⁹ Later medieval processions in Zürich retraced the miraculous walk of their patron saints from the Wasserkirche – marking the site of their execution – to the Grossmünster, constructed over their tombs and possessing their relics. Again, the tale underscores the miraculous post-mortem power of the saints, fixes the locus of their veneration as self-determined, and allows for the path of this holy procession to maintain its relevance in the present urban topography. The cephalophores Felix, Regula, and occasionally Exuperantius, appear holding their heads on a number of seals and coins from Zürich throughout the later Middle Ages, evidencing the saints' crucial standing in the city's self-imaging.³⁰ As the coins illustrate, this status was principally derived from the presence of their relics – the same relics that they themselves deposited on the site of the future Grossmünster. The importance of the cephalophoric event in making a narrative transition from the saints' martyrdom to the veneration of their relics can be seen in an eight panel cycle of the legend of Felix, Regula and Exuperantius that formed part of

²⁹ See: Végh J., "Catalog Entry", in Cséfalvay P., *Christian Museum Esztergom* (Budapest: 1993) 192.

³⁰ For example, the second seal (1225) of the Rat and town of Zürich and the sixth seal (1347) of the mint portray the three saints holding their heads in front of their chests. Interestingly, as late as the early Seventeenth Century, the Zürich ducat carried an image of Felix and Regula holding their heads. Regarding the seals of Zürich, see: Seidenberg M., "Sigillum Sanctorum Felicis et Regule. Die Stadtheiligen als Siegelmotiv", in Etter e.a. (eds.), *Die Zürcher Stadtheiligen Felix und Regula* 63–77, esp. 74 fig. 35 and 75 fig. 37 for the above-mentioned seals. Regarding the images of the saints on coins, see: Geiger H.-U., "Die Zürcher Stadtheiligen im Münzbild", in Etter et al. (eds.), *Die Zürcher Stadtheiligen Felix und Regula* 79–83.

an altarpiece apparently produced in the environs of Vienna circa 1490.³¹ The first four scenes portray the saints' flight from Augaunum, their being dragged before the governor, their torment in boiling oil, and their torture on the wheel. These four scenes set up the martyrdom by introducing the narrative of their persecution and illustrating their steadfast endurance of horrific physical torture. The fifth scene portrays their martyrdom by beheading. This is followed by the cephalophoric episode of the saints carrying their heads to their graves.³² The two final scenes depict the miraculous discovery of the grave and the opening of the grave to find the relics.³³ Fully half of the cycle portrays the beheading (literally the making of the relics), the saints' miraculous translation of their relics, and the equally miraculous discovery of these relics. The scene of the cephalophoric act ties this relic-centric narrative together by demonstrating the miraculous post-mortem potency of the relics as well as their presence at the locus of discovery and presumed veneration. Cephalophory proves that these relics are indeed genuine, for they were placed there by the saints themselves.

Among the most popular saints in the registry of cephalophores, particularly in the Limousin wherein her relics were venerated, we find St. Valerie.³⁴ According to her *passio*, she carries her freshly decollated head and presents it to St. Martial while he is saying Mass. Again, the miracle, as articulated in both text and image, asserts the saint's post-mortem potency as well as her agency in establishing the cult of her own relics. As Cynthia Hahn has observed, in transferring her severed head to the bishop saint, Valerie herself underscores her approval of clerical control of her relics.³⁵ In doing so, Hahn correctly iterates the connection between

³¹ See: Cséfalvay, *Christian Museum* 191–193 and Plate 12. The circumstances of the altarpiece's production are not certain, but it seems likely that possession of their relics was the catalyst. Investigation of relic inventories in the region might help shed light on possible locations for the altarpiece's placement.

³² While the rest of the paintings are kept in the Christian Museum in Esztergom, the sixth scene is in the collection of the Österreichische Galerie in Vienna (cat. No. 4978).

³³ This last scene is illustrated in Etter e.a., *Die Zürcher Stadtheiligen Felix und Regula* 117.

³⁴ See: *Vita et miracula s. Valeriae* in *Analecta Bollandiana* 8 (1889) 278–284.

³⁵ See: Cynthia Hahn C., "Valerie's Gift: A Narrative Enamel Chasse from Limoges", in Sears E. – Thomas T.K. (eds.), *Reading Medieval Images. The Art Historian and the Object* (Ann Arbor: 2002) 187–200; Hahn C., "Interpictoriality in the Limoges Châsses of Stephen, Martial, and Valerie", in Hourihane C. (ed.), *Image and Belief. Studies in Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Index of Christian Art* (Princeton: 1999) 109–124; Hahn C., *Portrayed on the Heart. Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley: 2001) esp. 124–125.



Fig. 4. Unknown artist (Limoges), *Reliquary chasse of St. Valerie* (ca. 1170). Engraved and gilt copper with champlevé enamel. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum. Image © Boltin Picture Library. Bridgeman Art Library International.

the trope of cephalophory and the claim to possess relics.³⁶ A series of small reliquary *châsses* from the Limousin, crafted in the later Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, portray Valerie's gift – connecting her cephalophoric miracle to her relics, contained within the reliquary [Fig. 4].³⁷ Hahn observes that the existence of some twenty-two such *châsses* ornamented with images of Valerie and her cephalophoric miracle demonstrates the great popularity of Valerie's cult in the Limousin, and the manner in which the visual presentation of her relic cult seems to compensate for the relative paucity of both relics and textual sources.³⁸ Though these reliquaries and their ornamental vocabulary are very much

³⁶ Though correctly connecting the miracle to notions of bodily resurrection and the post-mortem capabilities of saints, Michael Frassetto does not note the direct connection to relic claims, as is so nicely elucidated by Hahn. See: Frassetto M., "Resurrection of the Body: eleventh century Evidence from the Sermons of Ademar of Chabannes", *Journal of Religious History* 26, 3 (2002) 235–249.

³⁷ See: O' Neill J.P. – Hawkes S., *Enamels of Limoges. 1100–1350*, exhibition catalogue from the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York: 1996) Cat. 20116–118; Hahn "Valerie's Gift: A Narrative Enamel Chasse from Limoges"; Gauthier M.-M., "La légende de Saint Valerie et les emaux champlevés de Limoges", *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique et Historique du Limousin* 86, 1 (1955) 35–80; Simone Caudron, "Des Reliques de Saint Martial et Sainte Valérie, un Christ et une Châsse de l'Oeuvre de Limoges à Chantelle en Bourbonnais: Provenance et destin", *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique et Historique du Limousin* 130 (2002) 39–54.

³⁸ Hahn, "Valerie's Gift: A Narrative Enamel Chasse from Limoges" 187.

in accord with larger production in the Limousin, the imagery of Valerie's martyrdom and cephalophory adds a particular narrative dimension to these reliquaries, specifically in regard to asserting the means by which their contents are custoded. While these small reliquaries are portable and therefore do not assert a fixed locus of relic veneration, as does the more monumental complex of San Minato al Monte, they do localize the control of this power within a hierarchy of authority. These images assert a presence of relics that are minute in actuality, but are presented as substantive through an intertextual imaging of them as conflated with the gift of her head, thereby imbuing each fragment with greater import in keeping with the notion of *pars pro toto*. The imagery essentially provides a visual and perceptual upgrade to the relics, while simultaneously asserting the hagiological notion of *imitatio Christi* that is implied with all relic fragments. The reliquaries shape the meaning and presentation of their fragmentary contents. As these very reliquaries were presented under the custodianship of the Church, the visual narrative of Valerie's *auto-translatio* is constructed in such a way as to localize this potent presence in the hands of the clerics who would oversee the use and presentation of the relics, and thereby the cult. The imagery on these reliquaries seems therefore connected to clerical assertions of control of relics and saints' cults, as is constantly reiterated, particularly after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.³⁹

In the largest of these reliquaries – circa 1170, now in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg – this narrative of the cephalophoric presentation of the relics to the cleric Martial is visually told through the reiteration of Valerie's body four times – each evidencing a different phase in the tale. She first appears at the center of the lower register being led upright to her death. To the right, she is beheaded and catches her freshly decollated head in her hands – now covered to emphasize the receipt of this holy relic. In the center of the upper register, just above her unfragmented, living figure, she bears her head in her cephalophoric march, guided by an angel.⁴⁰ In her fourth and final appearance, she is shown at the right presenting her head to St. Martial. Thus, the four images

³⁹ See in particular, Hermann-Mascard, *Les reliques des saints* passim, esp. 148, 214, and 348ff.

⁴⁰ In being guided by an angel, Valerie is aligned with the cephalophoric tales of St. Denis, St. Firmin of Amiens, St. Minias, St. Quitterie of Aire-sur-Adour, and others who are similarly guided to their post-mortem repose by heavenly chaperones. Regarding the role of angelic guides in cephalophory, see: Thomas, "Sur l'origine de la céphalophorie" 407.

of the saint's body recount her transition from living virgin to miraculous saint to holy relic in the possession of the Church. While the imagery and narrative are substantially more complex, the basic narrative of the relics is appropriately and effectively told through the portrayal of the saint's body.⁴¹ As Hahn has meticulously elucidated, the tale told on the St. Petersburg *châsse* is arranged so as to emphasize the importance of Valerie's gift of her own relics – establishing her relic cult and definitively situating it within the ecclesiastic landscape of the Limousin. Similar to Valerie's donation of her head to clerical control, St. Osyth of Essex stood up after being decapitated, picked up her head and carried it to the door of a local convent. It is interesting that the *legendae* of both of these female cephalophores are constructed so as to underscore their submission to clerical authority. This seems to link this use of cephalophory not only to clerical control of relics, but also to the *cura monialium* or pastoral care of nuns.⁴²

As in the Limousin *châsses* of St. Valerie, images of saints bearing their heads on reliquaries do more than represent the saint in a simple iconic or narrative manner. Additionally, these cephalophoric images serve to authenticate the relics contained therein. Such depictions identify the saints, demonstrate the veracity of the relics, and legitimize the (clerical) control over the relics. In being portrayed holding their heads, these saints are shown as active agents in custodizing and presenting their own relics. By holding their heads (relics), cephalophoric saints are illustrated as bearing their own relics, literally as auto-reliquaries. This creates a close association between relic and reliquary. In this, reliquaries with cephalophoric portrayals of saints serve as analogues to figural reliquaries. To be sure, body-part reliquaries, such as the bust of St. Just, more overtly obfuscate the distinction between container and contents. But, in ornamenting a reliquary with an image of the saint as his or her own relic-bearer, a conceptual conflation is invited in which the saint portrayed is both content and container. An example of this can be found in the exquisite tripartite reliquary of Saints Maxien, Lucien, and Julian from the treasure of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris [Figs. 5 and 6].⁴³ Fashioned circa

⁴¹ The larger narrative is recounted in great detail in Hahn, "Valerie's Gift".

⁴² Regarding the notion of *cura monialium*, see Hamburger J.F., "Texts Versus Images: Female Spirituality from an Art Historian's Perspective", in Hamburger J.F. (ed.), *The Visual and the Visionary. Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: 1998) 13–34.

⁴³ The reliquary is now in the Musée National du Moyen Âge – Thermes & Hôtel de Cluny, Paris (Inv. Cl. 10746). See: Durand J., *Le trésor de la Sainte-Chapelle* exhibition catalogue,

1261–62, this reliquary bears images of the three saints standing within a tripartite Gothic arcade as though embodying a litany of saints or a list of relics contained therein. The three saints – martyrs of Beauvais – are clearly identified in lettering that floats where their heads would normally be found in a pre-decapatory state. Each saint bears his head, and the outer two – Maxien and Julien – look toward the central figure of Lucien whose head still wears his Episcopal mitre. Even here, clerical hierarchy (and primacy) is illustrated, as the bishop saint is both centrally located and literally looked up to by his two martyred disciples. In holding their heads, the saints provide a palpable visualization of the presentation of the relics contained within. The inside panel of the reliquary reveals three relic cavities – one behind each saint. Above each niche is an inscription identifying the respective relics – ‘DE/ BRAC/ HIO: S(an)C(t)I/ MAXI/ ANI’ above the niche behind the figure of ‘S(anctus). MA/ XIANUS’, ‘DE/ COS/ TA. S(an)C(t)I/ LUCI/ ANI’ above the niche behind the figure of ‘S(anctus). LUCI/ ANUS’, and ‘DE/ COS/ TA. S(an)C(t)I/ IULI/ ANI’ above the niche behind the figure of ‘S(anctus). IULI/ ANUS’. The images of the saints on the front therefore echo the containment of the relics behind them. The reliquary becomes akin to the saint portrayed, as each holds his own relics – the incised golden figure serving as the visual flesh of the relic fragment resting in the cavity behind. This visual and conceptual fusion of container and contained verifies the authenticity of the relics in no uncertain terms. While the relics are not all portions of the saints’ heads, as evidenced by the inscription identifying the arm of St. Maxien, this seems less important than the textual and iconic establishment of the relics’ saintly pedigree. Recent studies have demonstrated how reliquaries ‘speak’ to identify their contents, not so much in the simplistic sense of Braun’s notion of mimetic ‘speaking reliquaries’ with heads containing heads and arms containing arms, but rather in conveying something of their ongoing power and identity, as well as their ability to ‘speak’ or perform hagiological and liturgical notions.⁴⁴ The Sainte-Chapelle reliquary of Saints Maxien, Lucien, and Julian ‘speaks’ more to identify the relics as parts of the saints, than to identify which parts are contained. While the

Musée du Louvre, Paris – 21 May 2001–27 August 2001 (Paris: 2001) 164–166 (cat. No. 38); Souchal G., “Un reliquaire de la Sainte-Chapelle au Musée de Cluny”, *Revue des Arts* 10 (1960) 179–194.

⁴⁴ Braun J., *Die Reliquiare des christlichen Kultes und ihre Entwicklung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: 1940). For reassessments of Braun’s thesis of mimesis, see: Montgomery, *The Use and Perception*; Hahn C., “The Voices of the Saints. Speaking Reliquaries”, *Gesta* 36 (1997) 20–31.



Fig. 5. Front of the *Reliquary of Saints Maxien, Lucien and Julien* (ca. 1261–1262). Engraved and gilt silver. From the treasury of Sainte-Chapelle Paris, now preserved in Paris, Musée National du Moyen Âge – Thermes & Hôtel de Cluny. Image © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource.



Fig. 6. Inside panel of the *Reliquary of Saints Maxien, Lucien and Julien* (ca. 1261–1262). Engraved and gilt silver. From the treasury of Sainte-Chapelle Paris, now preserved in Paris, Musée National du Moyen Âge – Thermes & Hôtel de Cluny.
Image © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource.

inner inscription does reveal the specifics of which body part is contained, the more prominent outer images use the cephalophoric figures to assert the saints' agency in the containment of their relics within this very reliquary. The images on the reliquary essentially portray the saints as both their own reliquaries and their own *ostensores*. As with so many cephalophoric images, the trope is among the most potent means of asserting that the relics are indeed legitimate and uncontestable.

Certainly the most well-known cephalophore is St. Denis, largely due to his conscription as a force in legitimizing Capetian kingship and the art-historical importance of his titular church.⁴⁵ As noted, his *passio* contains one of the earliest textual cases of cephalophory.⁴⁶ The miracle appears to have been intentionally inserted into the saint's tale with the composition of the Latin life *Post beatam* in the late eighth or early ninth century, not long after its initial appearance in the *passio* of St. Just in the seventh century.⁴⁷ The author of the *Post beatam* borrows the trope and puts it to specific use in transferring the tale of the martyrdom and head carriage to Paris. In asserting the clerical status of the saint's two companions – Rusticus is now a priest and Eleutherius is a deacon – the story is neatly used to fix the reception and subsequent custodianship of the relic by proper authorities in the Church hierarchy, but adamantly local representatives thereof.⁴⁸ In essence, Denis vests the clergy (and abbey of St. Denis) with the authority to secure his most sacred head.

⁴⁵ Baltzell J.H., *The Octosyllabic Vie De Saint Denis. A Critical Edition* (Geneva: 1953); Bähr I., *Saint Denis und seine Vita im Spiegel der Bildüberlieferung der französischen Kunst des Mittelalters* (Worms: 1984); Delaporte M.M., *The Headless Holy Man: A Study of the Lives of Denis by Hilduin of Saint-Denis*, (Ph.D. diss., Princeton, NJ: 2004); Karsina J.J., *Saint Denis in Painting and Sculpture. A Catalog of Representations of the Saint from the Earliest Examples to the 16th Century*, (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa: 1964).

⁴⁶ Hilduin "Passio s. Dionysii", *Patriologia Latina* 106, col. 47ff; R. J. Loenertz, "La légende de s. Denis l'Aréopagite", *Analecta Bollandiana* 69 (1951) 217–235; Delaporte M.M., "He Darkens Me with Brightness: The Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius in Hilduin's *Vita* of Saint Denis", *Religion & Theology* 13, 3–4 (2006) 219–246, esp. 220. Buchner argues that Hilduin's use of the tale is directly borrowed from the *passio* of saints Lucian and Fuscian. See: Buchner M., "Die Areopagitika des Abtes Hilduin von St. Denis und ihr kirchenpolitischer Hintergrund", *Historisches Jahrbuch* 59 (1939) 69–117. See also, Moretus Plantin, *Les passions de Saint Lucien*.

⁴⁷ Walter C., "Three Notes on the Iconography of Dionysius the Areopagite", *Revue des Études Byzantines* 48 (1990) 255–274, 269ff.

⁴⁸ Walter, "Three Notes on the Iconography of Dionysius the Areopagite" 271. Walter notes that, in contrast to the Western use of this cephalophoric episode to assert control of relics, the subsequent Byzantine manifestations of the trope are less specifically and functionally focused, as they largely assert to value of the head as trophy, but not in terms of fixing the custodianship thereof.



Fig. 7. Valois Portal, (ca. 1175). Paris, north transept of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis. Photograph by the author.

It is hardly surprising that the abbey church, built over the site of his tomb to which he carried his head – contains numerous images of his cephalophoric ambulation. Guided by angels, the saint carried his head from the hill of his execution – subsequently named Montmartre – to the site of his burial – later the abbey church of Saint-Denis. This dramatic event was portrayed on the fourteenth-century *jubé*, of which fragments survive, as well as the tympanum of the twelfth-century Valois portal, relocated to the exterior of the north transept in the thirteenth century [Fig. 7].⁴⁹ It has been suggested that the mid twelfth-century carvings were originally intended for the south transept portal, facing the cloister so as to provide the monks with a model for pious devotion and complete self-sacrifice for God.⁵⁰ While this is certainly possible, and the imagery would

⁴⁹ On the Valois Portal, see: Erlande-Brandenburg A., “La porte du cimetière à l’abbatiale de Saint-Denis dite “Porte des Valois”. Emplacement original, déplacement, datation”, *Comptes-rendus des séances de l’année – Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 143, 1 (1999) 189–217; Williamson P., *Gothic Sculpture, 1140–1300* (New Haven: 1998) 27–28.

⁵⁰ Williamson, *Gothic Sculpture, 1140–1300* 28. Dating of the portal sculptures varies. Williamson suggests circa 1170, and Spiegel echoes this with a circa 1175 dating, while Blum and others suggest an earlier dating, as far back as 1144. See: Blum P.Z. – Blanc A. – Holmes L. – Johnson D., “Fingerprinting the Stones at Saint-Denis: A Pilot Study”, *Gesta* 33

indeed serve this demonstrative purpose, the portal's message is equally, if not more so, directed toward visualizing the presence and power of the abbey's titular relics. Certainly, the prevalence of royal images in the jambs and archivolts suggests the idea that the kings of France are essentially vassals of St. Denis, thus linking the state and the saint.⁵¹ However, the portal's iconographic scheme seems more pointedly directed at establishing the centrality of the relics even within this religio-political relationship. Indeed the Valois appellation, which seems to influence much of the subsequent political reading of the portal, does not arise until the sixteenth-century construction of the Valois funerary mausoleum.⁵² The thirteenth-century relocation, if in fact it was relocated from the south transept, to the north transept would give additional significance to the imagery. As the 'Porte du Cimetière', the north transept portal faced the abbey burial grounds, thereby linking the body of the saint with the bodies of the deceased, allowing for an *imitatio sancti Dionysii* to ensue. This illustrates the notion of inhumation *ad sanctos* as being particularly efficacious precisely because of the proximate presence of the saint's remains. The portal focuses attention on the martyrdom/cephalophory in the tympanum, both narratively and structurally supported by background story in the lintel that depicts the Roman prefect Fescennius ordering the execution of the saint and his companions on the left while to the right the three imprisoned saints receive Last Communion from Christ. In the tympanum, St. Denis has already had his head separated from his body, though he still kneels reverently and holds his decollated head toward his companion (presumably St. Rusticus) as though reassuring him of the glorious reward of his own impending martyrdom. The narrative is developed on the right as another companion, presumably Eleutherius, kneels with his head bowed forward exposing his neck to the executioner's axe-blade. Christ appears in the central archivolt above, preparing to receive the martyrs in Heaven. St. Denis' conversational interface with Rusticus could be interpreted as providing a model for monastic obedience, as Williamson suggests. However, Rusticus' standing as a priest seems to make his figure echo that of Christ giving Last Rites to St. Denis in the

(1994) 19–28, esp. 24; Spiegel G.M., "The Cult of St. Denis and Capetian Kingship", in Wilson S., (ed.), *Saints and Their Cults. Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (Cambridge: 1983) 141–168, esp. 166 n. 75.

⁵¹ See, for example, Spiegel G.M., *The Past as Text. The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore: 1997) esp. 156 and 265.

⁵² Erlande-Brandenburg, "La porte du cimetière à l'abbatiale de Saint-Denis" 211.



Fig. 8. "The decapitation of St. Denis", detail of right inner jamb capital of the Valois Portal (ca. 1175). Paris, north transept of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis. Photograph by the author.

right lintel carving just below. While inverting the roles played by the two saints in these scenes, this conjunction serves to underscore the clerical role of maintaining and offering both relics and the Eucharist to the faithful. St. Denis' gesture in the tympanum seems to offer his head to his priestly companion in an iconographic shorthand that underscores Rusticus' clerical role as guardian of the sacred relics – specifically the head of St. Denis. Thus, while addressing clerical functioning (and proper behavior), the portal seems to address this less in terms of spiritual role modeling than in terms of the proper custodianship of holy relics – securing the sacred head. As such, it seems to speak less to the monks than it does to the laity, as it vividly demonstrates the clergy's role in controlling the interface between the saint and his people. In this it is not unlike the smaller reliquary *châsses* of St. Valerie discussed above.

Equally striking are the small carved capitals on the inner jambs that depict the saint's martyrdom and cephalophory on the threshold of this portal. On the right side of the door, St. Denis faces inward toward the church as he is decapitated [Fig. 8]. On the left side, angels guide the



Fig. 9. “The cephalophoric walk of St. Denis”, detail of left inner jamb capital of the Valois Portal (ca. 1175). Paris, north transept of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis. Photograph by the author.

saint in his cephalophoric walk to the site of his burial – the very church whose portals this relief graces [Fig. 9]. It is noteworthy that the angels appear to be leading St. Denis into the church itself, underscoring the liminal nature of both the portal and the portage of the relics to the very site where they could be venerated. This connection would have been heightened upon viewing the near-contemporary (late thirteenth-century) reliquary bust of St. Denis, formerly in the abbey’s treasury (lost 1793). Known from Felebien’s publication of an early eighteenth-century engraving by Philippe Simonneau and Nicolas Guérard, the reliquary portrayed the mitred head of the saint supported by angels, alluding to the angelic guides who led the saint to the site [Fig. 10].⁵³ Thus, the reliquary bust has a certain

⁵³ The series of five engravings, circa 1706, illustrate the contents of the relic *armoires* of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis. Reproduced in: Félibien D.M., *Histoire de l’abbaye royale de Saint-Denis en France* (Paris, Frederic Leonard: 1706) plate III. See: Paris, Musée



Fig. 10. Philippe Simonneau and Nicolas Guérard, *Reliquary bust of St. Denis* (ca. 1706). Engraving of the treasures of the Abbey of Saint-Denis. From: Dom M. Félibien, *Histoire de l'abbaye royale de Saint-Denis en France* (Paris, 1706), plate III. Photograph by the author.

allusive narrative quality to it, as the tale of the saint's cephalophory is referenced, albeit in compressed and iconic form. In this, the reliquary bust of St. Denis has certain affinities with the reliquary bust of St. Just, as both are formed so as to convey narratives of their subjects' post-mortem cranial portage. Both reliquary busts assert the cephalophory of the saint as a means of underscoring both the power of the relics, and more importantly, their presence at the *locus* of their ostension.

But the claim to the relics of St. Denis was fraught with dispute, particularly between the monks of St. Denis and the canons of the cathedral of

du Louvre, Alcouffé D., *Le trésor de Saint-Denis: Musée du Louvre, Paris, 12 mars–17 juin 1991* (Paris: 1991) 33, fig. 9.

Notre Dame in Paris. From the thirteenth century the two parties claimed relics of the saint's head, and this dispute flared up into a wholesale legal battle in the Fifteenth century.⁵⁴ The abbey of St. Denis held that it possessed the entire body of the saint, including his head. This claim was reinforced by the saint's cephalophoric act of carrying his head to the site. Meanwhile, the cathedral held that it was in possession of the top of the saint's head. An alternate iconography of St. Denis developed, apparently in response to the claim by the cathedral of Paris to possess the relic of the saint's cranium. According to this version, which circulated from the thirteenth century, the saint's head was not decollated, but rather sliced above the eyes. This variation on the tale conveniently explains the presence of relics both at his titular abbey and in the cathedral. The providence of the cathedral's cranial relic was given clout by its claim to have been a gift of King Philip Augustus. Given the variance in the head relics, each side turned to both *passione* texts and cephalophoric images to bolster its claims.⁵⁵ The images in particular seem to have provided potent evidence, in that they variously portrayed the saint's head as severed at the neck or at the brow, depending upon the claimant. The monks of St. Denis favored the (more canonical) image of the saint holding his entire head, while the canons of the cathedral supported their argument with images of the saint with his head sliced above the eyes, holding the top of his head. In both cases, cephalophoric images are used (and manipulated) as key evidence bolstering claims to the possession of relics.

Here we see a case of the cephalophoric tale mutating to respond to multiple relic claims. The seeming incompatibility of the two rival claims is thereby solved, or at least to the satisfaction of the cathedral canons and bishop, if not to the monks of the abbey. However, a certain iconographic inconsistency ensues, as we have images of the saint with his head cut off at the neck and others with the cut above the eyebrows. The former, by far the more common, is consistent with the abbey's claims, and occurs with

⁵⁴ See: Delaborde M.H.F., "Le Procès du Chef de Saint Denis en 1410", *Mémoires de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris et de l'Île-de-France* 11 (1884) 297–409; Bähr I., "Aussagen zur Funktion und zum Stellenwert von Kunstwerken in einem Pariser Reliquienprozess des Jahres 1410", *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 55 (1948) 41–57; Spiegel, "The Cult of St. Denis and Capetian Kingship" 144.

⁵⁵ A superb discussion of the use of images within this relic dispute was offered by Erik Inglis in his paper "Art as Evidence in Medieval Relic Disputes. Three Cases from 15th-century France", delivered at the *Matter of Faith* conference at the British Museum on October 6, 2011, as I was in the final stages of editing this article. I thank Erik for generously and most graciously sharing his paper with me.

frequency in the decorative fabric of the church, as discussed above. The latter aligns with the cathedral's claim.⁵⁶ Both versions are used to assert the presence (and possession) of the relic of the saint's head or the upper portion thereof. Curiously, today the image on the jamb of the portal of the Virgin – the northernmost portal on the west façade, appropriates the iconography of the saint holding his entire head, as he is guided toward the door by his two angelic companions. However, this is a nineteenth-century replacement of the original image which was destroyed during the Revolution. In the lost original jamb figure, the saint was shown with his head sliced in two, carrying the top portion in accordance with the cathedral's claims. The contest between the abbey and the cathedral eventually led to a legal dispute in 1410.⁵⁷ While the ruling on this legal battle has not come down to us, it demonstrates how narrative texts, relic display and images were utilized together to assert rightful possession and authentication of relics. In any case, we see the use and variation of cephalophoric imagery and tales as part of a rhetoric of relic claim.

While the narrative possibilities of cephalophory are frequently exploited in the interest of asserting the locus of relic claims, not all images of cephalophores are intended as such. Frequently, individual images of cephalophoric saints portray the saint with head in hand as an iconographic signifier that references the saint's identity. In these cases, the head portage localizes the saint's post-mortem power in his/her bodily relics, but only inasmuch as it references the saint's *passio* as demonstrating this power. These single images do not conscript the miraculous narrative into service in a specific locale with the assertion of clerical control of specific relics. An image of St. Just holding his head in the tiny church at St. Just en Chaussé, near Beauvais, does not so much visually proclaim the presence of his relics within the church as it references the miracle – in iconographic shorthand – at the spot where it initially occurred. While it localizes the narrative, it serves more as a clear indicator of the saint's identity and his relation to the site. As seen in the reliquary bust of the saint in Flums, in the context of reliquaries and images closely related to relic claims there is often a more fully developed narrative approach that literally refashions and recounts the tale as establishing the *loca sancta*.

⁵⁶ Delabord H.-F., "Relique du crâne de Saint Denis à Notre-Dame de Paris", *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires* 46 (1916) 190.

⁵⁷ The surviving proceedings are published and discussed in Delaborde, "Le Procès du Chef de Saint Denis en 1410".

It should be noted that not all reliquaries of cephalophores directly address this particular miracle. This is revealed by a comparison between the reliquary bust of St. Just (c.1488) and the contemporary (circa 1480) reliquary bust of St. Placidus, from nearby Chur. St. Placidus too is a cephalophore who picked up his decollated head and carried it to St. Sigisbertus – as a window in the cathedral of Chur illustrates.⁵⁸ Similarly, Hans Gedsner's silver reliquary bust of St. Ursus from Solothurn, fashioned in 1486, makes no reference to this saint's cephalophoric miracle.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the St. Just reliquary more adamantly asserts the saint's cephalophory, while the near-contemporary and geographically proximate busts of St. Placidus and St. Ursus make no such visual statement.⁶⁰ This might be explained by the fact that there was no rival claim to St. Placidus' relics and they were uncontested at Chur, while other sites also claimed to possess the head of St. Just. Einsiedeln also claimed to possess St. Just's head, and this may have prompted Flums to boldly assert its claim and back it with textual and visual support.⁶¹ This comparison underscores the way that cephalophory could be used to emphatically assert claims of relic possession when necessary, particularly in the face of rival claimants to the same relic.

Similarly, cephalophory can be used to visually assert the presence of relics and the saint's initiation and localization of the relic cult, even when there is little textual evidence of the miracle being incorporated into the

⁵⁸ The reliquary has been attributed to Hans Schwartz of Constance. See: Dosch L., *Das Dommuseum in Chur GR*, Schweizerische Kunstführer (Bern: 1988) 12; Gantner J., *Kunstgeschichte der Schweiz, Zweiter Band. Die gotische Kunst* (Frauenfeld: 1947) 374–375. For the legend, see: "Passio sancti Placidus" *Acta Sanctorum*, Julii, Tomus III (1723) 238–240.

⁵⁹ The reliquary bust can be found in the treasury of the cathedral of St. Ursen in Solothurn. See: Hering-Mitgau M., *Domschatz St.-Ursen-Kathedrale in Solothurn*, Schweizerische Kunstführer (Basel: 1972) Nr. 1; Walz R., *St. Ursen in Solothurn*, Schweizerische Kunstführer (Bern: 1960) 13; Widmer B., "Der Ursus-und Victorkult in Solothurn", in *Solothurn. Beiträge zur Entwicklung der Stadt im Mittelalter*, Kolloquium vom. 13./14. November 1987 in Solothurn (Zürich: 1990) 33–81, esp. 67; Schubiger B., "Der hl. Ursus von Solothurn: Beobachtungen zum Kult und zur Ikonographie seit dem Hochmittelalter. Der Stellenwert eines lokalen Märtyrers im Leben einer Stadt", *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* XLIX (1992) 19–38.

⁶⁰ However, a series of silver relief plaques from circa 1700 does portray the unusual *en masse* cephalophoric portage of heads, as Ursus, Victor and companions emerge from the river into which their decapitated bodies had been hurled. While later than the material discussed in this article, these plaques further evidence the use of narrative imagery of cephalophory to validate the authenticity of the relics contained within reliquaries. See: Schubiger, "Der hl. Ursus von Solothurn" esp. 19ff. and figs. 6 and 7.

⁶¹ Montgomery, "Mittite capud meum... ad matrem meum ut osculetur eum: The Form and Meaning of the Reliquary Bust of St. Just"; Montgomery, *The Use and Perception of Reliquary* esp. 53.

saint's *passio*. St. Nicasius of Reims is portrayed holding his head in his hands on the trumeau of his titular church in Reims, wherein many of his relics are kept, as though introducing the relics at the very point of visual and physical ingress to the church.⁶² On the Callixtus Portal of Reims Cathedral, St. Nicasius holds his head in his hands while being guided by angels toward the doorway, much like St. Denis and St. Just.⁶³ This suggests that the trope was effective enough in asserting relic claims that cephalophoric imagery might be developed beyond the textual tradition in an effort to assert the presence of relics and the saint's own mandate for their localized veneration. Though he was martyred on the site of the earlier cathedral, he was not buried here, but rather in the ancient church of Saints Agricola and Vitalis – on the site of the later basilica of Saint Nicasius. However, at the end of the ninth century, archbishop Fulco had the relics moved to the cathedral, and subsequently shrines of the saint existed in both churches.⁶⁴ The cranium of St. Nicasius was placed in a new silver shrine in 1213 by Archbishop Alberic. The shrine's inscription bore testimony to the saint's miraculous cephalology, and thereby suggested actual cephalophory as well.⁶⁵ This image of the saint's cephalophory on the Callixtus portal could be seen as part of a larger campaign to visually assert the saint's presence (particularly his head) in the episcopal church. The placement of the cephalophoric image on the cathedral portal, echoes the imagery of St. Denis on the Valois portal of the abbey church of St. Denis. Not only is St. Denis the model, but the successful trope seems to be the specific basis for this sculptural representation as it so emphatically proclaims the locus of the saint's relics, as the cathedral visually asserted its possession of some of the relics, possibly in response to the traditional resting place in the saint's titular church.

To be sure, images of cephalophoric saints appear even in locations that do not claim to possess their relics. This iconographic consistency demonstrates the way in which cephalophoric imaging near-indelibly imprints this tropic identity onto the saint's broader representation. In essence, once a cephalophore, always a cephalophore. While the texts and images of cephalophoric saints may largely initiate from the locus of their relic possession, once the iconography is established, it proliferates even

⁶² Hinkle W.M., *The Portal of the Saints of Reims Cathedral. A Study in Medieval Iconography* (New York: 1965) 18 and 22.

⁶³ See: Hinkle, *The Portal of the Saints of Reims Cathedral* 15ff.

⁶⁴ Hinkle, *The Portal of the Saints of Reims Cathedral* 20.

⁶⁵ Hinkle, *The Portal of the Saints of Reims Cathedral* 21.

beyond the specific locales of relic claims. It should be borne in mind that the very proliferation of such images does not mitigate the relationship between the trope and relic claims, but rather illustrates the ways in which this imagery spread beyond the immediate milieux of relic cults that seems to have spawned the initial development of the miraculous tales. Images of saints offering their heads to clerics or depositing them on the altar – such as we see with the reliquary bust of St. Just, the enamel *châsses* of St. Valerie, as well as a relief of St. Nicasius presenting his head to the altar on the thirteenth-century tympanum on the façade of Laon Cathedral – underscore the general notion of the miraculous nature of saints and their relics, as well as the practice of clerical control of saints' cults.⁶⁶ In the case of the Laon relief, the trope has become a more generic signifier for the functioning of relic cults.

While the ranks of cephalophore saints are legion, I believe that these few examples surveyed here illustrate some of the ways in which the trope of cephalophory was employed to assert claims to the possession of relics. To be sure, it will be necessary to fully explore the cults and visual culture of many more cephalophores in order to develop a more comprehensive and definitive understanding of the uses of the trope. I propose that we continue this line of inquiry regarding the origins and significance of the cephalophoric phenomenon, focusing on the manifestations of the trope in the ambit of loci of relic claims. Doubtless, variations and exceptions will come to light, but it seems likely that patterns will continue to emerge. I suggest that widespread evidence of the relationship between cephalophory and relic cults supports the theory that the trope was specifically developed and proliferated as a means of asserting the presence of relics, thereby assuring the location of sacral power, and by extension, of pilgrimage and clerical authority. In order to fully understand the significance of the hagiographic trope of cephalophory – in word and image – we must look beyond the *vitae* and *passiones* of the saints, to the larger and more dynamic context of relic veneration that spawned it. For, at the end of the tale, it is all about securing the sacred head.

⁶⁶ See: Hinkle, *The Portal of the Saints of Reims Cathedral* 17; Lambert É., "Les portails sculptés de la cathédrale de Laon", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 6, 17 (1937) 83–98, especially 97ff.

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THE JOHANNESSCHÜSSEL AS ANDACHTSBILD:
THE GAZE, THE MEDIUM AND THE SENSES*

Barbara Baert

*When the word turns into a body
And the body opens its mouth
And speaks the word from which it was created –
I will embrace that body
And lay it to rest by my side.*

(“Hebrew Lesson 5”
Chezi Laskly, *The Mice and Leah Goldberg*)

This article takes as its starting point a specific image type that occupies a complex position in the iconology of the decapitated head: the *caput Iohannis in disco*, or head of St John the Baptist on a platter, for the sake of brevity identified by the German term *Johannesschüssel* [Fig. 1].¹

The *Johannesschüssel* has a very particular relationship to the material culture of the isolated head in Western Europe. On the one hand, the artifact remained connected to its prototype, the skull relic; on the other, it grew into one of the most important devotional images of the Middle Ages in both sculpture and painting. In so doing, the *Johannesschüssel* made the cult of the severed male head a channel for important Christian

* This article offers a further exploration on the senses of what I did in *Caput Joannis in Disco*. {Essay on a Man's Head}, (Visualising the Middle Age VMA 8), 2012. With thanks to Georg Geml, Lise de Greef and Soetkin Vanhauwaert.

¹ I will use the German loan word. Réau L., *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 2. *Iconographie de la Bible*, 1. Ancien Testament (Paris: 1956) 431–463; Combs Stuebe I., “The Johannesschüssel. From Narrative to Reliquary to Andachtsbild”, *Marsyas. Studies in the History of Art* 14 (1968–1969) 1–16; Arndt H. – Kroos R., “Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel”, *Aachener Kunstblätter* 38 (1969) 243–328. See also my essays: “Le chef de Jean Baptiste”, *Graphè. La Bible, Arts, Littératures, Philosophie* 16 (Lille–Arras: 2006) 91–125; “Saint-John's head on a plate by Andrea Solario (1507, Louvre). Transmission and transformation of an ‘Andachtsbild’ between Middle Ages and Renaissance, between North and South”, *Critica d'arte* (2007) 62–86; “Saint-John-in-disco. Prolegomena to the History of a Man's Head”, *Mitteilungen für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte* 20 (2009) 221–287; “He must increase, but I must decrease. On the spiritual and pictorial intertwining between the Johannesschüssel and the Vera Icon (1200–1500)”, in Enenkel K. – Melion W. (eds.), *Meditatio-Refashioning the Self. Theory and Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual Culture*, Intersections. Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture 17 (Leiden: 2011) 323–366.



Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* (1500–1515). Limestone, diam. 42 cm. Cologne, Schnütgen-Museum (K 156).

ideas, such as the role of the gaze and empathy in the process of looking, the performative activities of processional images and relics, the archetype of the evil-averting visage, the involvement of the entire sensorium in spiritual experience, and, finally, the role of medium in the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity.

Scripture says that John the Baptist's head was severed by order of Herod; later martyrologies claim that his skull was found in the course of the fourth century.² The existence of a head relic becomes apparent

² Innitzer T., *Johannes der Täufer* (Vienna: 1908) 397.



Fig. 2. Skull relic of St John. Amiens, Cathédrale Notre-Dame.

from the twelfth century onwards in letters and registries from the East.³ After the Fourth Crusade of 1204, a small deluge of supposed skulls of St John flowed westwards: no fewer than twelve skulls were venerated as John the Baptist's by the end of the Middle Ages.⁴ In northern Europe the most popular of these skulls was without a doubt that of Amiens [Fig. 2].⁵

³ Semoglou A., "Les reliques de la vraie croix et du chef de Saint Jean Baptiste. Inventions et vénération dans l'art Byzantin et post-Byzantin", in Lidov A. (ed.), *Eastern Christian Relics* (Moscow: s. d.) 217–233.

⁴ Réau, *Iconographie de la Bible* 431–463; Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 245.

⁵ Rückert R., "Zur Form der byzantinischen Reliquiare", *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 3, 8 (1957) 7ff.; Breuil A., "Du culte de saint Jan Baptiste et des usages profanes qui s'y rattachent", *Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de Picardie* 8, s.l. (1846) 3–90; du Cange C., *Traité historique du chef de saint Jean-Baptiste* (Paris, Sebastien Cramoisy &

Brought back from the crusades by Walo of Sarton, it had allegedly been found immured in Constantinople. Walo's skull relic had a cut above the left eyebrow. This cut retroactively gave rise to the legend that Herodias had stabbed John's severed head in a fit of rage.⁶ According to the *translatio* legend the head was originally kept on a costly platter with a silver cover, but Walo sold the platter for a large sum of money.⁷ To this day, the cathedral of Genoa claims to possess the 'original' platter relic of brown agate.⁸

Sebastien Mabre-Cramoisy: 1665); Salmon A., *Histoire du chef de saint Jean-Baptiste* (Amiens: 1876); Pardiac J.B., *Histoire de saint Jean-Baptiste et de son culte* (Paris: 1886).

⁶ This well-established legend was a variation on an early Christian version in which Herodias was said to have posthumously pierced John's tongue with a needle, because it was with his tongue that he had chided her and incurred her wrath (*infra*); Combs Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel" 5. This incident is mentioned in the Egyptian *Serapion martyrion* (c. 390): *The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 11 (Manchester: 1927) 234–287, 456. The *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1260) does not mention the motif; Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend. Readings of the Saints*, ed. W.G. Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: 1993) 132–140. Later, however, it was picked up in the mystery plays (*supra*). See also: Thulin O., *Johannes der Täufer im geistlichen Schauspiel des Mittelalters und der Reformationszeit* (s.l.: 1930).

⁷ Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 245.

⁸ For other examples of skulls and platters in the East and the West, see Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 252–253. The gilt silver rim and the decorated holder on the back, with vines as a symbol of the Eucharist, were added later, presumably c. 1300 in a French workshop (Müller Th. – Steingraber E., "Die französische Goldemailplastik um 1400", *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 3, 5 (1952) cat. no. 16). An inscription on the rim reads: INTER NATOS MULIERUM NON SURREXIT MAIOR JOHANNIS BAPTISTAE (Matt. 11:11). Around 1420, a small head of St John in gold enamel was added to the middle of the dish and mounted in an aureole set with rubies. In medieval lapidaries, the agate was associated with the sea. When submerged, it was believed to attract pearls. The *Physiologus* calls it the gem of the precursor, because when thrown into the sea, it attracts the pearls and points the fishermen to them. In the same way, John pointed to the spiritual pearl: Seel O. (ed.), *Ecce agnus dei; Der Physiologus* (Zurich–Stuttgart: 1960) 42. The red ruby, the gem of gems, was compared to Christ, as the divine light, but of course also to the blood of the Passion. In the context of John the Baptist, the ruby refers to the blood of his martyrdom. In his last will and testament of 1492, Pope Innocent VIII (Giovanni Battista Cibo) asked for the brown agate dish of Salome to be placed in the chapel of St John the Baptist in Genoa cathedral, beside the reliquary with the Baptist's ashes. The text is quoted in Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" note 100, and published by Banchero G., *Il duomo di Genova* (Genova: 1855) 208 ff. See also Grosso O., "Le Arche di S. Giovanni Battista e il Piatto di Salome", *Dedalo* 5 (1924) 432. The last will specifies *Bellissimo bacile de calcidonio, ossia agata*. This emphasis on chalcidony refers to the martyrdom of the Baptist as mentioned in the *Legenda Aurea* (1260), following the *Historia tripartite*; Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea. Vulga Historia Lombardica Dicta*, ed. T. Graesse (Dresden–Leipzig: 1846) 356; see also, for the Latin edition: Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. G.P. Maggioni (Florence: 1998); Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend* 132–140. On Ascension Day and the Feast of the Decollation of St John (29 August), the Genova dish was put on display on the altar. The pope had, in fact, been given the dish by the French cardinal Balu, who had acquired it from a church 'from the East'. It is not clear whether this dish is the same agate dish described in a pilgrim's account in the sixth-century Church of the Holy Sepulchre: Breviarus de Hierosolyma (*Ubi*

In short, during the age of the Crusades, a new image type came into being that simulated St John's head on a platter. The earliest *Johannesschüsseln* survive as independent objects, but they can also be found on keystones, Johannite seals, and amulets. The concept of the *Johannesschüssel* is based on the words of Salome,⁹ in *Matthew* 14:8: 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter' (*in disco*). This artifact in turn forms a kind of *Ersatz-* or *Devotionalkopie* (Kretzenbacher) for the mother object of devotion: the skull.¹⁰ Indeed, *Johannesschüsseln* often feature a cut above the eyebrow, a direct reference to the relic in Amiens. Some even contain actual relics.

1. *The Johannesschüssel: Quid?*

The *Johannesschüssel* is an image type that sprang from both text and relic. It is an image that *presents death*. This death is not an ordinary death; it is the mother of all deaths: the decapitation of the last of the prophets and the first of the martyrs. Indeed, on the basis of exegetical interpretations,¹¹ John was the *Precursor* (*prodromos*) and the *proto-martyr*. He belongs to the Old and the New Covenant. This special position will be important for the meaning and the function of the Platter of St John. *Johannesschüsseln* are usually made of wood or precious metal, but papier-mâché and terracotta were also used as popular and inexpensive alternatives. We have relatively little information on the actual use of these platters. When on display, the *Johannesschüssel* was venerated (like the relic) as proof

est ille discus ubi caput sancti Johannis portatum fuit); Kötting B., *Peregrinatio religiosa. Forschungen zur Volkskunde* 33–35 (Regensburg-Münster: 1950) 360. Aristocrats collected precious 'Salome dishes'. Jean, Duc de Berry, owned an extremely valuable specimen in gold, agate and gems, including sapphires, emeralds and rubies; Guiffrey J., *Inventaires de Jean, Duc de Berry* 2 (Paris: 1896) 80.

⁹ Her name is mentioned for the first time by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (c. 37–after 100); Michl J. et al., "Johannes der Täufer", in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 5 (Freiburg: 1960) cols. 1084–1089.

¹⁰ Kretzenbacher L., "Johannishäupter' in Innerösterreich. Ein Beitrag zu Verehrung und Brauch um Johannes den Täufer", in *Carinthia I. Festschrift zur Vollendung des 60. Lebensjahres des Hofrates Universitätsprofessor Dr. Gotbert Moro* 152 (1962) 232–249.

¹¹ The foundations of the exegetical tradition and its hermeneutics were laid open by Hartmann M., *Der Tod Johannes des Täufers. Eine exegetische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie auf dem Hintergrund narrativer, intertextueller und kulturanthropologischer Zugänge*, Stuttgarter Biblische Beiträge 45 (Stuttgart: 2001). See also Ernst J., *Johannes der Täufer. Interpretation. Geschichte. Wirkungsgeschichte* (Berlin: 1989); and Lupieri E., *Giovanni Battista fra Storia e Leggenda* (Brescia: 1988); Pape D.R. – Goodwin K., *Der Vorläufer. Johannes der Täufer, Prophet und Wegbereiter des Herrn* (Stuttgart: 1991).



Fig. 3. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy INTER NATOS MULIERUM NON SURREXIT MAJOR JOANNE BAPTISTE (ca. 1500). Papier-mâché, diam. 34 cm. Leuven, Museum M.

against epilepsy, headaches, throat aches, feminine bleeding, melancholy and depression, and men's erotic difficulties in particular.

The *Johannesschüssel* in papier-mâché at Museum M in Leuven was made for the chapel of Saint Peter's Hospital around 1500, and tradition has it that it was venerated on August 29 – the day on which John's decapitation is commemorated – for protection against headaches and throat aches [Fig. 3].¹² The *Johannesschüssel* of Saint Peter's Hospital in Leuven also features a cut to the forehead. The platter has an inscription that

¹² Smeyers M., "Sint-Jan-in-disco", in Bessemans L. (ed.), *Schatten der Armen. Het artistiek en historisch bezit van het O.C.M.W.-Leuven* (Leuven: 1988) 144–147.

reads: INTER NATOS MULIERUM NON SURREXIT MAJOR JOANNE BAPTISTE, from *Matthew* 11:11: 'Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.' This inscription was also found on the thirteenth-century platter relic of Genoa, and it is known that Guilelmus Durandus began his eulogy for August 29 with these words.¹³

The *Johannesschüssel* is an intensely 'ergonomic' object (Fig. 4). There is evidence that suggests that these platters were used in performative activities.¹⁴ Some platters of St John were part of mystery plays. In the *Mons Mystère de la passion de Jean Baptiste*, adapted by Jean Michel (†1501), we encounter the following stage direction: 'Icy frappe Herodyas d'un Cousteau sur le front du chef de Sainct jehan et le sang en sort'.¹⁵ Lavish experiments with blood, some a bit more gruesome than others, are undoubtedly an essential characteristic of the image type of the *Johannesschüssel*.¹⁶

Archives inform us that at the summer solstice outdoor processions took place across Europe to ensure the regeneration of the land and the fertility of women. The circular platter was made to correspond to the circular movements of the ritual dance, while the dance was attuned to the sun's orbit.¹⁷ John the Baptist, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, are the two saints who share with Jesus the distinction of having their nativity marked with liturgical commemoration. In John the Baptist's case the celebration is on June 24, which was at one time the longest day of the year.¹⁸ After that, the hours of sunlight gradually decrease

¹³ Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 299.

¹⁴ Combs Stuebe, "The Johannesschüssel" 5.

¹⁵ The original was probably written by Eustache Marcadé (†1440) and performed in Arras between 1420 and 1430. The redaction of Jean Michel was 30,000 verses long and was performed over the course of a week; Cohen G., *Le livre de Conduite du Régisseur et Le compte des Dépenses pour le Mystère de la Passion* (Oxford: 1925) 192; Subrenat J., "La mission de Jean-Baptiste dans les passions du XV^e siècle. L'exemplaire du Mystère de la passion d'Arras", in *Jean-Baptiste le précurseur au Moyen Âge. Actes du 26^e colloque du CUER MA* (Aix-en-Provence: 2002) 185–199.

¹⁶ *Johannesschüsseln* were also thrown into the sea because they allegedly remained afloat above places where people drowned. And in Pömben, Ostwestfalen, believers carried *Johannesschüsseln* around the altar on their head as a remedy against migraines; Sartori P., "Johannes der Täufer", *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* 4 (1932) cols. 704–765, col. 740.

¹⁷ All over the world human sacrifice seems to be closely linked with the mystery of food production (Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* 23). See also: Green M.A., *Dying for the Gods. Human Sacrifice in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (Stroud: 2001) 165–168. The sun was often imitated in the form of a straw wheel, and then set on fire the night of June 24, preferably at an elevated place. In Limburg, a similar ritual was practiced up until the beginning of the twentieth century in Herderen–Riemst.

¹⁸ *Acta Sanctorum* 25, 644–646.



Fig. 4. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* (early 13th century). Painted wood. Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum.

until December 25: the winter solstice and the birth of Christ. Augustine (354–430) saw in these parallel liturgical birthdays a reference to John the Baptist's testimony in *John* 3:30: 'He (Christ) must increase, but I must decrease'.¹⁹ The idea of "decrease" for the benefit of growth is incorporated in these words, comparable to the cycle of the sun and the light

¹⁹ 'Nam a Natali Ioannis incipiunt dierum detrimenta; a natali Christi autem, renovantur augmenta' [<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorsi/index2.htm>].

of days itself. Platters of St John were indeed linked to this archetypal cosmic given.²⁰

2. *The Johannesschüssel as Andachtsbild*

The mystic Gertrude of Helfta (1256–1301/02) describes in her vision of John the Baptist how young and handsome he appeared to her, though he is always depicted so horribly.²¹ This passage is interesting because it shows how the exterior of the Precursor, in the midst of its horror, offers her a paradoxical sort of beauty.

The *Johannesschüssel* exposes death and horror with varying degrees of exhibitionism. One Baptist's head has the mouth hanging open; another has the tongue protruding. Some have wide, staring eyes; the eyes of others are closed or half-closed. Sometimes the bloody neck is emphasized; in other cases one is confronted with the face. The suffering countenance of the *Johannesschüssel*, however, is ambivalent. The beheading itself is macabre, but at the same time the facial expression reflects a martyr's death, which typologically lifts the horror toward a sacrifice made for God. And as Precursor the *Johannesschüssel* must always precede the 'noblesse' of Christ.

By analogy with the perception of Christ's suffering, which is supposed to stimulate viewers' empathy, the naturalistic, suffering face of John the Baptist is not bereft of spiritual meaning. Toward the end of the Middle Ages the *Johannesschüssel* had in many cases come to constitute an *Andachtsbild* related to the iconography of Christ.²² To begin with, there

²⁰ The sun was often represented in the form of a wheel made of straw that was set fire to on the eve of June 24. Such a ritual was still being performed in Herderen–Riemst in Limburg at the beginning of the 20th century. It is possible that *Johannesschüsseln* were produced from less durable materials for these St John celebrations. If so, they would have been far less likely to survive; Caspers C., "Het Sint Jansfeest in kerk- en volksgebruik", in Janssen L. – Loeff K. (eds.), *Getuigenis op straat. De Larense Sint Janstraditie* (Laren: 2005) 121–135.

²¹ Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 266; *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae, I. Sanctae Gertrudis legatus divinae pietatis* (Paris: 1875) 418: 'miro modo amabilis, flore verantissimae iuventutis [...] quia senex et dispicibilis ubique depingeretur'. The authors assume that Gertrude looked primarily at miniatures of the *Johannesschüssel*.

²² Such as the handbook of Ludolph of Saxony (ca. 1300–1377/78), which took the life of Christ as a model: 'Quid ergo tu faceres si haec videres? Numquid non te projiceres super ipsum Dominum [...]?' – 'Would you not throw yourself upon the Lord?' In the term *projicere*, James Marrow recognizes a double meaning of projection. The *Andachtsbild* is supposed to evoke empathic emotion, and thereby project the spectator's innermost feelings; Marrow J.H., "Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages

is the physical kinship between John and Christ, who are second cousins. John is usually depicted with wilder hair and rougher beard, as befits the new Elijah.²³ On the other hand, John is already less a prophet and more Christ-like.²⁴ By extension, he is also exempt from all negative depictions of the ethnic Jew in medieval iconography.²⁵

We know of a number of *Johannesschüsseln* that may literally have been modelled after the head of Christ. The *Johannesschüssel* by the Master of the Nördlingen Retable, for example, is related to the same workshop's 1462 *Crucifixion* in St George's Church in Nördlingen [Figs. 5–6].²⁶ The Baptist's head of the *Johannesschüssel* of the parish church of Prato allo Stelvio (ca. 1400) was completed first and only later mounted on a sixteenth-century platter. A *Crucifixion* of ca. 1360 from the same church, however, has identical facial features. Sometimes John also has a forked beard, as he does on an early thirteenth-century exemplar from Naumburg [Fig. 7], taking over one of the typical physical characteristics of Christ as described in the apocryphal Lentulus letter.²⁷ In some cases the distinction can no longer be made. A Maasland head sculpture (ca. 1370–1380) now

and the Early Renaissance", *Simiolus* 16 (1986) 155. On the *Andachtsbild*: Noll T., "Zu Begriff, Gestalt und Funktion des Andachtsbildes im späten Mittelalter", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 67 (2004) 297–328; Schade K., *Andachtsbild. Die Geschichte eines kunsthistorischen Begriffs* (Weimar: 1996); Schmidt P., "Bildgebrauch und Frömmigkeitspraxis. Bemerkungen zur Benutzung früher Druckgraphik", in *Spiegel der Seligkeit. Privates Bild und Frömmigkeit im Spätmittelalter* (exhibition cat.) (Nürnberg: 2000) 69–83; Schmidt P., "Sinn und Un-Sinn des Kultbildes. Die Intellektualisierung und die Mystifizierung mittelalterlicher Kunst", *Kunstchronik* 9/10 (2008) 457–461; Geml G., *Frühe Johannesschüsseln* (unpublished M.A. thesis). (Vienna: 2009) 31–41; Combs Stuebe, "The Johannesschüssel" 1–16.

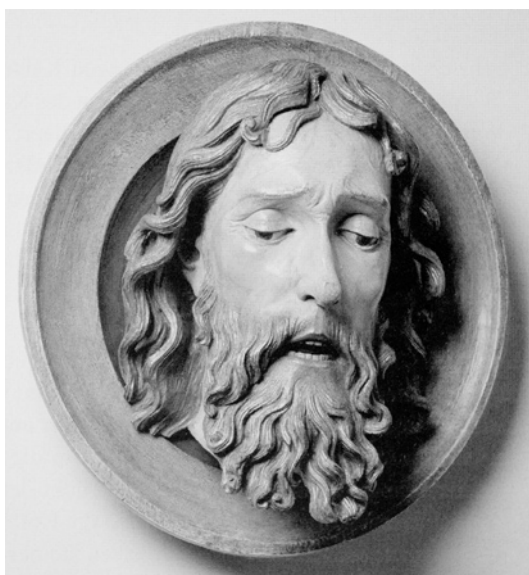
²³ Suckale R., "Der Meister der Nördlinger Hochaltarfiguren und Till Riemenschneider. Exemplarische Beiträge zum Verständnis ihrer Kunst", in Corsepius K. (ed.), *Opus Tessellatum. Modi und Grenzgänge der Kunstwissenschaft* (Hildesheim–New York: 2004) 328.

²⁴ 'Dies ist nicht das Haupt eines Hingerichteten, eher ähnelt es einer Christusikone. Johannes weicht von der Erscheinung Christi nur durch den längeren Bart und das wirrere Haar ab' (Suckale, "Der Meister" 328). From a strictly genealogical point of view, one would actually have to say that the younger Christ resembles the older John.

²⁵ See the whole edited volume by: Frojmovic E. (ed.), "Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other. Visual Representations and Jewish-Christian Dynamics in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period", *Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions* 15 (Leiden: 2002).

²⁶ Suckale, "Der Meister" 327–340. The *Johannesschüssel* comes from a small church in Tajov, Hungary. The exemplar is of the horizontal type: the head lies flat on the platter. A hook on the reverse reveals that it was meant to be hung (see also Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 282). There are other examples in Geml, *Frühe Johannesschüsseln* passim.

²⁷ The Lentulus letter is a thirteenth-century apocryphal document from Constantinople that claims to go back to a letter from Pilate to Lentulus in which the judge describes Christ's face. Among other things, it explicitly mentions that Christ's hair was parted in the middle. This source standardized the face of Christ in iconography. The Letter of Lentulus also influenced the appearance of the *vera icon*, see Dobschütz E. von, *Christusbilder. Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* 1 (Leipzig: 1899) 308–329.



Figs. 5–6. Master of the Nördlingen Retable, *Johannesschüssel* and *Crucifix* (ca. 1460). Painted wood. Nördlingen, Sankt Georg (*Crucifix*). Banská Bystrica, Stredoslovenské Museum (*Johannesschüssel*).



Fig. 7. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* (13th century, platter 16th century). Painted wood. Naumburg, Cathedral Treasure Vault.

preserved in Tongeren has generally been identified as John because it belonged to the collection of the church of St John the Baptist, but the formal conventions and hairstyle are very close to those of the suffering Christ [Fig. 8]. From the perspective of workshop practice it is clear that artists sometimes approached orders for a head of John the Baptist as a 'wilder version of the head of Christ', perhaps using a local Crucifix or Pietà as a model.

The contemporary viewer must have noticed this kinship between Christ and John, given that the two faces were often seen together in one and the same ecclesiastical space. This kinship goes deeper than the physical, deeper than the role of artistic models. There are symbolic meanings

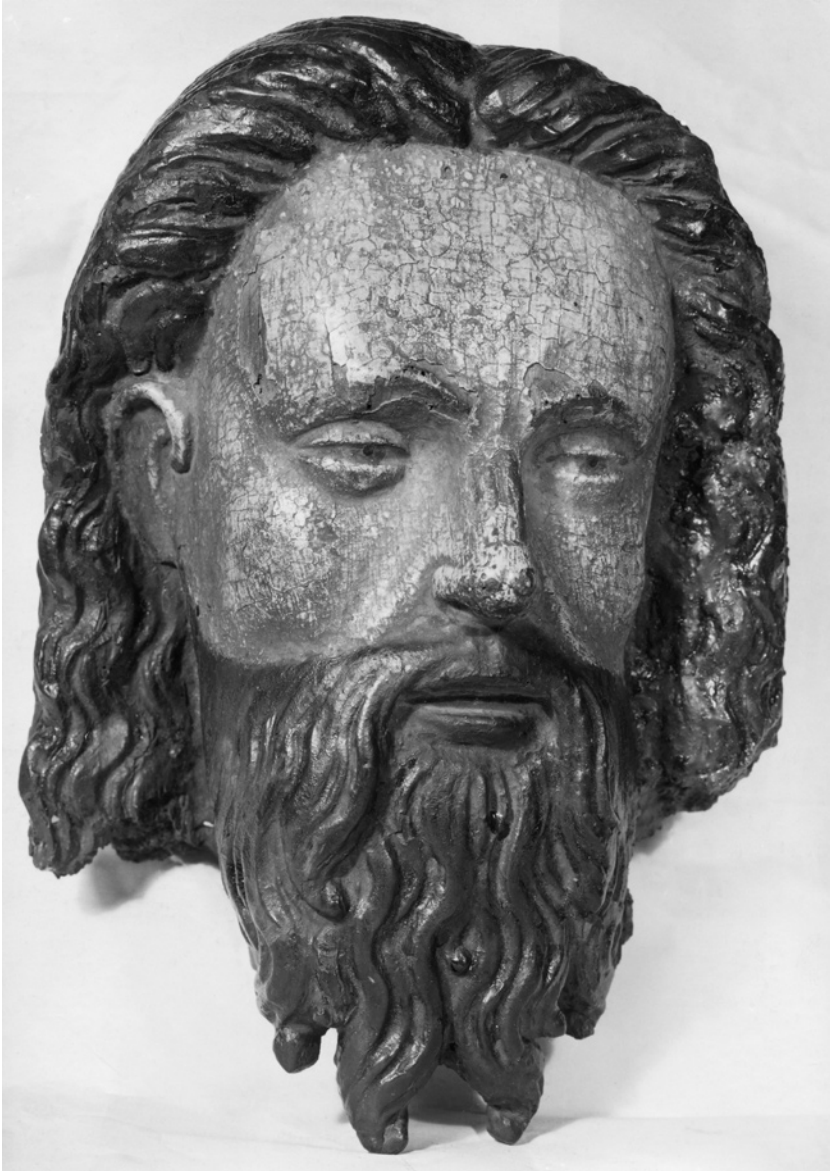


Fig. 8. Mosan unknown artist, sculpture of a male head (1370–1380). Painted wood, 33 cm. Tongeren, Sint-Jan de Doperkerk. Image © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.

at work in the case of John and Christ that were experienced in the tension between the fading away of one man inversely to the other's ascendance. This brings me back to my original question concerning the nature of the *Johannesschüssel* as the Christ-like *Andachtsbild*. What defines the process of the viewer's looking at the *Johannesschüssel*, which has been poured into the mould of Christ's *Andachtsbild* but differs from it in terms of roughness (it is after all a beheading) and form (here we are concerned with the hermeneutics of the platter)?

In what follows I will distinguish between four levels at which the fusion between John and Christ can be interpreted: the relationship between word and image, the absorbing gaze, the *apotropaion* and the senses, and finally the phenomenological tension between head and face.

3. *The Epigraphy of the Johannesschüssel*

Many *Johannesschüsseln* bear an inscription. The platter is not only the bearer of the head, but also bearer of the word. The edges of the platters possess the perfect tectonics (i.e. formal structures) for this purpose, and usually they simply report: CAPUT JOHANNIS IN DISCO. Another frequently occurring inscription is the gospel pronouncement: DA MIHI HIC IN DISCO CAPUT JOANNIS BAPTISTAE. The inscription literally turns the *Johannesschüssel* into an interactive object. The phrase NON SURREXIT INTER NATOS MULIERUM MAJOR JOANNE BAPTISTE, from *Matthew* 11:11, is also quite popular and adorns both the original thirteenth-century agate charger from Genoa and the papier-mâché exemplar in Leuven.²⁸ Guilelmus Durandus' (ca. 1235–1296) praise of John's feast day begins with this pronouncement, which a fourteenth-century manuscript from the cloister of Engelbert shows also to have been widespread in hymns:²⁹ 'Inter natos mulierum, Hic Iohannes vas sincerum Principatum tenuit'.³⁰ The *Inter natos* phrase is indicative of the bond between John and Christ. Because the words are Christ's own, he is subtly integrated into the equation: at one level through the speaking of the word; at the other, through

²⁸ Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 300.

²⁹ This is the basis on which Durandus justifies John having two feast days. Durandus G., *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (Hagenau, H. Gran: 1509) fol. CCX: 'Quia inter natos mulierum non surrexit Joanne baptista. Merito ecclesia celebrat festum de illo et facit ei festum duplex. S. nativitatis et decollationis'.

³⁰ Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 299; Kehrein J., *Lateinische Sequenzen des Mittelalters: aus Handschriften und Drucken*, ed. F. Kupferberg (Michigan: 1873) 356.



Fig. 9. Unknown artist, pilgrim's badge with epigraphy *HIC MAGNVS CORAM DOMINO* (16th century). Gilded copper, diam. 7,3 cm. Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh.

the image. By being seen and read at once, Christ and John are woven into a single soteriology that is prepared by a decapitation – a soteriology, moreover, that must begin in the heart of martyrdom.

The degree to which word and image can generate a chain of meanings is also evident from the inscription on a sixteenth-century insignia from the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp [Fig. 9].³¹ *HIC MAGNVS CORAM DOMINO* literally means: 'Here is/appears the great one before the Lord'. The phrase comes from *Luke* 1:15 and is also sung in the

³¹ Koldeweij J., *Geloof en geluk: sieraad en devotie in middeleeuws Vlaanderen* (Arnhem: 2006) 35, fig. 2.20.

Introit of the vigil on the eve of the Nativity of John the Baptist, June 23.³² CORAM is related to being present, to appearing before someone – for example, *coram iudice*: appearing before the judge.³³ But the meaning of this *praesentia* is ambiguous. John appears to the Lord in death. The moment John dies, he shall look upon the face of Christ. Hence CORAM is also about seeing. And this is precisely the other side of the coin: through the visage of John, we see Christ. The fact that the phrase refers to the *dies natalis* and the medallion itself to the *decollatio* connects the two liturgical feasts of death and rebirth: a rebirth that has made *praesentia* possible for the visage of the invisible God.

A *Johannesschüssel* in relief now preserved in Hamburg's Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe is inscribed: EN QUO PERIT IUSTUS QUASI NON SIT DEO DILECTUS/CUM SIT EIUS PRECIOSA MORS HIC IN CONSPECTU DOMINI [Fig. 10]. This pronouncement is identical to a widely known sequence³⁴ that recalls *Isaiah* 57:1: 'The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart'.³⁵ In this sequence death in the visage of the Lord is foregrounded even more literally. The epigraph articulates looking at the *Johannesschüssel* as a kind of seeing that ultimately leads to the vision of God, the *beata visio*.³⁶ We have already seen that the *Johannesschüssel* freezes that fraction of a moment that enables an opening to the Hereafter. It even seems as if looking at the *Johannesschüssel* likewise channels the desire to see the impossible. The beheaded head must bring us to the Visage – *In conspectu domini*. The sense of sight is also one of the most important liturgical components of the Eucharist. The priest holds aloft the host – the *ostensio* – and pronounces the words 'Behold the Lamb of God' immediately before administering communion, conflating the Baptist's prophetic utterance with Christ's command to 'do this in memory of me'.

The epigraph MERETRIX SVADET, PVELLA SALTAT, REX IUBET, SANCTUS DECOLLATUR is inscribed on the sixteenth-century reliquary dish from Naumburg mentioned earlier. 'The harlot urges, the girl dances, the king commands and the saint is beheaded.' These words are quoted from a sequence of the *In decollatione sancti Ioannis Baptistae* by Godescalc

³² Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 299.

³³ Buschmann J.E., *Synonima Latino-Teutonica. Latijnsch-Nederlands woordenboek der 17de eeuw* (Antwerp: 1889) 227.

³⁴ Kehrein J., *Lateinische Sequenzen des Mittelalters* 452.

³⁵ And also *Psalm* 116:9, 15: 'I walk before the Lord in the land of the living'; 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones'.

³⁶ Trottman C., *La vision béatifique: Des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII*, Bibliothèque des Ecoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 289 (Rome: 1995) passim.



Fig. 10. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy EN QUO PERIT IUSTUS QUASI NON SIT DEO DILECTUS/CUM SIT EIUS PRECIOSA MORS HIC IN CONSPECTU DOMINI (15th century). Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe.

(†1050).³⁷ The hymn was widespread in manuscript well into the Middle Ages, and had an influence on theater. The fifteenth-century *Alsfelder Passion Play* simply instructs the choir tersely, 'Chorus cantat: Meretrix suadet'.³⁸ The Naumburg inscription reduces the narrative to four essentials: urging, dancing, commanding and beheading. In the Middle Ages dancing, jubilation, speaking and singing were forms of active participation in the devotional process.³⁹

This brings me to a painted *Johannesschüssel* of ca. 1600 from the Hôpital Notre-Dame à la Rose in Lessines (Belgium), which is inscribed: O CRUDELE SPECTACULUM [Fig. 11].⁴⁰ The words are ambiguous: they may refer to participation in the spectacle of the gospel drama, but also the *spectaculum* that 'helps itself' to the gaze. *Spectaculum* is derived from *speculum*: that which mirrors and reflects like the platter itself, is by extension *specularis*, provoking thought and nestling itself in the mind as the ultimate *compassio*.⁴¹

4. The Absorbing Gaze

The inscriptions show clearly that John is mediated through hymns, liturgy, sequences and dramaturgy, elevated into a Christ-like *Andachtsbild*. The suffering of John is a prefiguration of Christ's suffering.⁴² The *Johannesschüssel* is integrated into the idiom of sacrifice. The liturgy marries word

³⁷ Kehrein, *Lateinische Sequenzen* 352. This is also included in the *Missal of Naumburg* (1517).

³⁸ Grein C.W.M., *Alsfelder Passionsspiel* (Kassel: 1874) 28.

³⁹ Boerner B., *Bildwirkungen. Die kommunikative Funktion mittelalterlicher Skulpturen* (Berlin: 2008) 208: 'Bildkommunikation findet selten ohne jeglichen sprachlichen Bezug statt, auch der kommunikative Gehalt eines religiösen Bildwerks, seine spezifische Botschaft also, steht fast immer im Kontext eines sprachlichen Diskurses'. See also the interesting examples in: Tripps J., "Der Kirchenraum als Handlungsort für Bildwerke: 'handelnde' Altarfiguren und hyperwandelbare Schnitzretabel", in Bock N. (ed.), *Kunst und Liturgie im Mittelalter: Akten des internationalen Kongresses der Bibliotheca Hertziana und des Nederlands Instituut te Rome, Rome, 28.–30. September 1997, Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 33 (Munich: 2000) 235–247.

⁴⁰ Vandenbroeck P., *Hooglied. De beeldvorming van Religieuze Vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, vanaf de 13de eeuw* (Brussels: 1994) 59, ill. 52.

⁴¹ The topic of spectacle and public punishment is too large to be discussed here. See Merback M.B., *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel. Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: 1999) passim.

⁴² Böhme calls this soteriology the 'martyrotheology' of John the Baptist; Böhme H., "Die Enthauptung von Johannes dem Täufer", in Geismar Chr. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe, Tod* (Vienna–Klagenfurt: 1995) 379–384.



Fig. 11. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy O CRUDELE SPECTACULUM (ca. 1600). Oil on wood. Lessines, Hôpital Notre-Dame à la Rose.

with image so that the event commemorated can be envisioned mentally. The four evangelists surround the *Johannesschüssel* built in relief in Hamburg. This iconography calls to mind paraliturgical schemata, such as the JHS monogram in an aureole surrounded by angels or the four evangelists [Fig. 12].⁴³ Hence even at the level of iconographic conventions and the idea of the circle, the sacramental meanings of John and Christ become virtually interchangeable.⁴⁴

Looking upon the *Johannesschüssel* and emphasizing the act of seeing given in the epigraphs reveals an intertwining with the *ostensio* and the host, and makes the role of blood, sacrifice and the lamb clear both inside and outside of liturgical space. It is astonishing that a gruesome, severed head was able to provide this channel. Miri Rubin expresses it thus:

⁴³ Göttler C., "Vom süßen Namen Jesu", in Geismar Chr. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe, Tod* (Vienna–Klagenfurt: 1995) 292–295, ill. 2–4.

⁴⁴ Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 301: 'So liegt die Übernahme eines christologischen Bildtypus vor [...] Allein mit diesem Bezug wird dem Bild der Johannesschüssel ein unvergleichlicher Rang bezeugt'.



Fig. 12. Master W.A., *Christ monogram* (15th century). Copper engraving. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

In medieval culture, representations of the body sometimes powerfully assimilated it into moments of agonising sacrificial torment within the language of religion, occasions on which it was made most human, suffering, passing, feminine, tormented, and vulnerable. At such moments frailty and humanity were celebrated, and thus expressed a pact between the supernatural and the natural, earthly and heavenly, the godly and the human. It was a symbol of many reconciliations.⁴⁵

Alongside the fascination for the body part, and even for the abject, there are reconciliation and vulnerability, which according to Rubin are archetypically connected with the sacrificed body, as are the powerful undercurrents of the *Johannesschüssel*. Like Christ, the *Johannesschüssel* is an *Andachtsbild* involved in the arousal of empathy and *compassio*.

Beholding the visage of John is a confrontation with the death of the last prophet and the first martyr. What is beheld is in fact the transition from the Old Covenant to the New. The *Johannesschüssel* is an image *im Augenblick des Todes*, at the moment of death; it is the *Andachtsbild* of the transition to eternal life. The ebbing away of breath, mind and soul at the threshold was, as we see, strikingly depicted in the English alabasters. The curious painting (41 × 33 cm) from the collection of the Comte d'Oultremont in Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse, attributed to Jan Mostaert (1526–1550), also interprets the drama of death in this way [Fig. 13].⁴⁶ John's soul leaves his head, accompanied by weeping angels. John's head itself weeps. The ephemeral nature of the tear – it has not yet dried – is meant to move the viewer⁴⁷ but at the same time demonstrates the

⁴⁵ Rubin M., *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: 1992) 359.

⁴⁶ There is a similar painting in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon (inv. no. CA 109), previously attributed to various masters and now considered a copy after a painting by Jan Mostaert in the National Gallery in London (inv. no. NG 1080). For Dijon and London, see: Hoogewerff G.J., *De Noordnederlandse schilderkunst*, 5 vols. (The Hague: 1937) vol. II, 458–459; Friedländer M.J., *Lucas van Leyden and Other Dutch Masters of His Time, Early Netherlandish Painting* 10 (Leiden: 1973) 70; Rainer B.R. – Krischel R., *Genie ohne Namen. Der Meister des Bartholomäus-Altars* (Cologne: 2001) 378–381, ill. 63–64. There is still no literature on the painting in Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse. With special thanks to Soetkin Vanhauwaert.

⁴⁷ To my knowledge, weeping *Johannesschüsseln* are comparatively rare. In this example there is a far-reaching synthesis with the weeping Christ, weeping being the late medieval characteristic of his *Andachtsbild*. From the high Middle Ages in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward, tears were no neutral motif but an aspect of soteriology. On this form of lacrymology see Nagy P., *Le don des larmes aux Moyen Âge* (Paris: 2000) 388–412. Tears were part of a culture of purification/confession in which women were particularly active; they often found a model in Mary Magdalen. Geoffrey of Vendôme (d. 1132) states in his sermon: 'We do not read that she spoke, but that she wept. Despite this, we believe that she was eloquent, but with tears and not with words.' The author continues by saying that prayer and confession are purer without the tongue. From the thirteenth century onwards,



Fig. 13. Jan Mostaert (attributed), *Painted head of Saint John* (ca. 1526–1550). Oil on wood, 41 × 33 cm. Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse, private collection of Comte d'Oultremont. Image © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.



Fig. 14. Martin Hofmann, *Johannesschüssel* (ca. 1515). Wood. Strasbourg, Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame.

freshness of the death (or near-death): the fraction of a moment that will soon lead to the crystallization of the image. By extension, I believe we can also interpret the *Johannesschüsseln* in the sense of this idea of 'transition'. In Martin Hofmann's (active from ca. 1507 in Basel–1530) *Johannesschüssel* of 1515 in Strasbourg [Fig. 14] and Hans Gieng's (ca. 1525–1562) *Johannesschüssel* of 1535 [Fig. 15], for example, confrontation with the gaze, with the ecstasy of death, predominates.

tears become vehicles of the word; Jansen K.L., *The Making of the Magdalen. Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: 1999) 15; Lauwers M., "Noli me tangere". Marie Madeleine, Marie d'Oignies et les pénitentes du XIII^e siècle", *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Moyen Âge* 104, 1 (1992) 255–256. Guillaume of Auvergne (after 1223) compared this female capacity with childbirth itself. In short, from the perspective of medieval anthropology, weeping was a bodily means of communication that could take over the power of the voice as well as that of childbirth.



Fig. 15. Hans Gieng, *Johannesschüssel* (1535). Fribourg, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire.

To the extent that the function of the *Andachtsbild* expanded during the late Middle Ages, the empathy of suffering seems also to have translated itself gradually into a conscious strategy of the gaze. The viewer was drawn into a form of seeing that transcended mere physical looking. He was conducted in spiritual transport to the invisible visage of God. The physical and symbolic affinities between the faces of John and Christ noted above contributed significantly to this strategy.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The transition from corporeal sight to spiritual vision is an important dynamics in medieval exegesis on sight and insight, discussed already by the Venerable Bede. In his Homily 11.15, he says: 'For indeed all those who believe, whether they be those who saw him in the flesh, or those who believe after his Ascension, share in the most benevolent promise of his in Matthew: "Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God".' Matthew 5:8 is indeed a central phrase in these reflections on spiritual seeing; Deshman R., "Another Look at the Disappearing Christ. Corporeal and Spiritual Vision in Early Medieval Images",

The gaze that emanates from the *Johannesschüssel* is therefore somewhat paradoxical: the Baptist does not return the viewer's gaze. The *Johannesschüssel* is completely 'absorbing'.⁴⁹ But this does not mean that the *Johannesschüssel* is 'gazeless'. With its own dead gaze it channels the seeing of God, even if the eyes are closed, as with the *Johannesschüssel* in the Kremsmünster Stiftssammlungen (last quarter of the fifteenth century) [Fig. 16].⁵⁰ Perhaps we should rather speak of a specifically inward-turned gaze. Looking at the *Johannesschüssel* brings about a tumbling into a black hole, into an abyss.⁵¹ Hence, in John's absorbing gaze we can reach unchecked that which cannot be seen physically: the indication of the invisible visage of God.

Caroline Schuster Cordone has called the paradoxical exchange of gazes between the *Johannesschüssel* and the viewer the *Mittlerfunktion*.⁵² Artists would rather depict the dying than the dead. The border between life and death marks the moment at which the *Johannesschüssel* could arise *as image*. In this sense, too, John the Baptist is a mediator. The fraction of a moment taken up by the *Johannesschüssel* in order to be transformed from life to image expresses itself in the iconography of flowing: the still fluid blood from the neck or the still falling tear. Herein lies the difference to Christ. Where Christ as a living image has become an icon – the *vera icon* – John's iconic image is seized at a moment when he is being flung out of time. An incredible energy is released, an energy that quite fascinated the medieval and early-modern individual: the *apotropaion*.

The Art Bulletin 79 (1997) 518–546. See also: Kessler H.L., *Spiritual Seeing. Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: 2000) 35.

⁴⁹ I am referring to the famous text *De Visio Dei* by Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), in which he uses a painted icon (probably a *vera icon*) as an *exemplum* of seeing God for the monks of the abbey of Tegernsee. The icon follows the viewer with its gaze. See: De Certeau M. – Porter C., "The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa", *Diacritics* 17, 3 (1987) 2–38; Beierwaltes W., *Visio facialis. Sehen ins Angesicht. Zur Coincidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus* (Munich: 1988).

⁵⁰ Schultes L., "Eine Johannesschüssel in Stift Kremsmünster", *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 46–47, 2 (1993) 657–662.

⁵¹ 'Le trou', says Didi-Huberman G., "Un sang d'images", *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 32 (Paris: 1985) 128.

⁵² Cordone C.S. – Gieng H., "Johannesschüssel, um 1535", in *Museum für Kunst und Geschichte Freiburg* (2003) 1–3.



Fig. 16. Unknown artist, *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy DA MICH I IN DISCO CAPUT IOANNIS BAPTISTE MARCI 6 (last quarter 15th century). Wood. Kremsmünster, Stiftssammlungen.

5. *Apotropaion and the Senses*

The *Johannesschüssel* forms an image type of the black, devouring orifice: the open wound palpitates, the eyes stare the mouth gapes. The consequence of the inward-turned gaze is the abject, the inside-out: tongue, teeth, organs.⁵³ The *Johannesschüssel* satisfies the desire for an image prototype that unabashedly makes itself felt in the shock of absorption and

⁵³ Recall the “inner visage” of the wax-filled skull relic in Amiens.

abyss. We will call this shock the *apotropaion*.⁵⁴ It is an absorbing energy archetypally defined in the Medusa phantasm (to which I will return). Because the facets of devouring and the abyss by definition focus on the orifice, the *Johannesschüssel*, with its open mouth and open neck (often the aorta, the vertebrae, and so forth, are exposed), is the ultimate *apotropaion*. The shameless ‘visual penetration’ (*per-spicere*) of the black tunnels that John’s head possesses – mouth, throat, ears, nostrils – unleashes upon the viewer the precipitate energy of the evil-averting *apotropaion*. One may ask whether the success of the *Johannesschüssel* in agrarian regions that still maintained contact with deeper, pre-Christian patterns did not lie precisely in the apotropaic feeling of the object. In other words, the *Johannesschüsseln* will have been “charged” with the aforementioned forms of archaic apotropaic energy to a greater or lesser extent depending on the region.

Let us examine the mouth, tongue and throat more closely. The mouth refers to the ingress and egress of our breath. The open mouth evokes John’s final dying breath, the border marked by the *Johannesschüssel*. The mouth is a portal into the dizzying depths of the body. It introduces us to the interiority of the body, which is taboo. Through the mouth, things – including food – disappear, so that it becomes the antechamber of the throat. The mouth, together with the tongue, is one of the organs of speech. Some authors even associated the open mouth of the *Johannesschüssel* with John’s pronouncement ‘Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto’ (*John* 1:22–23).⁵⁵

In some cases the tongue protrudes from the mouth – one might think that this stems purely from a macabre sense of expressionism. But it can also be depicted this way without attempting macabre effects, as on the south-facing outer wall of the west aisle of the Dom of Münster (thirteenth century) [Fig. 17]. The sculpture is composed of several pieces of sandstone. A hand emerges from the wall, carrying a platter which in turn bears a head with a neck. The whole is set against the background of a large rosette aureole. In the south wall of the east aisle, there was an altar dedicated to John the Baptist. This space is still called the St John’s choir. The tongue is considered as the equivalent of the head.⁵⁶ This equivalence

⁵⁴ Vandenbroeck P., *Azetta. Berber vrouwen en hun kunst* (Ghent–Amsterdam: 2000) 119.

⁵⁵ Suckale, *Der Meister* 328.

⁵⁶ Chevalier J. – Gheerbrant A., *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres* (1997) 561–562.



Fig. 17. Unknown artist, *John's head* (13th century). Münster, Dom, south-facing outer wall of the west aisle.



Fig. 18. Etruscan, *Medusa* (ca. 500 B.C.). Terracotta. Campania.

is clear in the totem context.⁵⁷ The tongue is often kept as a trophy of the killed enemy. It guarantees the transfer of the other's power. The extended tongue is also an *apotropaion*. The forces that repel evil preferably attach themselves to the head, in particular the face. The eyes and mouth maintain the power of protection; Medusa often shows her tongue [Fig. 18].⁵⁸

The tongue is also a topos of the prophet. The tongue joins with the fire of God (*Isaiah* 30:27). The Holy Ghost descended on the apostles in

⁵⁷ Gastaut H., *Le crâne. Objet de culte, objet d'art* (Marseille: 1972); Penrose R., *Wonder and Horror of the Human Head. An Anthology* (London: 1953) passim.

⁵⁸ This is a phenomenon also noticed at executions; for further development, see: Edgerton S.Y., *Pictures and Punishment. Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance* (London: 1985) 126ff.

'cloven tongues like as of fire' (*Acts* 2:3). The tongue, just like the hand, is the revelation of God.⁵⁹ The tongue has the power of life and death (*Proverbs* 18:21). The tongue is 'cleft' – indeed, again, a mediator.⁶⁰ The tongue is the organ of taste; hence, it distinguishes good and evil.⁶¹ Because the tongue speaks, it also has a judicial connotation. Tongue is speech. Thus, the tongue is also connected to the glossolalia of the orator and the prophet.⁶²

As noted earlier, Herodias maliciously pierced the Baptist's tongue with a needle. This legend is thought to date back to the fourth century. The motif became a favorite subject in religious drama.⁶³ Jerome (347–420) says in his *Apologia contra Rufinum*: 'Herodias in Joannem: quia veritatem non oterant audire, linguam veriloquam discriminali acu confoderunt'.⁶⁴ 'Because the one did not want to hear the truth, the tongue (= the truth of the speech) was wronged'. John is the tongue, the voice in the wilderness that was not heard. In other words, the tongue attaches itself to the sense of hearing. Hearing is an extremely primal sense: it is the first and last sense; in principle it precedes speech.⁶⁵ After all, hearing is the sense that the fetus first masters in the womb: the fetus hears the mother's voice. It is also said that hearing is the last sense to fall away during the process of dying, and with comatose patients the only sense to remain latent.

At any rate, speech and hearing work together in a knowledge-generating system that precedes the visual-literary epistemology of Plato (429–347 BC).⁶⁶ Speech and aural communication belong to oral culture, in which acoustic mimesis – the passing on of values and insights – predominates over written and hence visible laws.⁶⁷ Oral culture is a

⁵⁹ Glazov G.Y., "The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplementum* 311 (2001) passim.

⁶⁰ Benthien C., "Zwiespältige Zungen. Der Kampf um Lust und Macht im oralen Raum", in Benthien C. – Wulf C. (eds.), *Körperteile. Eine kulturelle Anatomie* (Hamburg: 2001) 110–113.

⁶¹ Korsmeyer C., *Making Sense of Taste. Food and Philosophy* (Cornell: 2002) 19–22.

⁶² 1 Cor 14:2, 13: 'For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking the mysteries of the Spirit [...] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret'.

⁶³ Combs Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel" 5; Thulin, *Johannes der Täufer*; Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie" 301ff.

⁶⁴ Jerome, *Apologia contra Rufinum*, PL 23, col. 510.

⁶⁵ Wulf C., "Das mimetische Ohr", in *Das Ohr als Erkenntnisorgan, Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie* 2, 1–2 (1993) 9–15.

⁶⁶ Wulf, "Das mimetische Ohr" 9–10: 'Da der Hörsinn rückbezüglich ist, hört sich der Sprechende selbst. Sein Hören folgt seinem Sprechen.'

⁶⁷ It is moreover an epistemology that is rooted in magic, such as the reading aloud of spells in order to control nature. According to Christoph Wulf, 'Die Mimesis der Natur

culture of 'intercession,' in which prophets play an important role. For this reason, in certain cultures the tension between speaking and remaining silent is utterly double: it is a tension controlled by the boundaries of taboo.⁶⁸ Here we arrive elliptically at the text of the gospel in which the incest taboo is pronounced and judged, and which constitutes the occasion for revenge and death, an intuition that Jerome also formulated in his association of *audire* and *lingua*. And if we witness its effects in drama, insignia and epigraphs, then it appears that precisely these archaic laws of communication were isolated: urging (the voice), dancing (the voiceless that asks to be gazed upon), commanding (the voice), beheading (which leads to absolute voicelessness: taboo).

One could view John the Baptist – the last of the prophets, the voice crying in the wilderness – as the last embodiment of the acoustic system in the anthropology of systems for the generation of knowledge. His decapitation is in this sense a sacrifice made for the sake of seeing God-become-flesh. In this sense, the *Johannesschüssel* is also metaphorically a mediator: a link between the cultural shifts in the hierarchy of the senses.⁶⁹ The beheading of John the Baptist silences the cry in the desert – a necessary silence of the *vox* which leaves room for the *logos*. It is moreover fitting that the uterine, fetal character of the sense of hearing is specifically and intensely thematized with John the Baptist when he already recognizes the voice of the new Messiah while still in the womb (*Luke* 1:42).

Returning to the problematics of the *Andachtsbild*, the *Johannesschüssel* also challenges the viewer as a 'sonorous' communication, or more precisely, by the silencing of voice that it represents ('Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto', *John* 1:22–23). To look at the *Johannesschüssel* is to realize that we can no longer hear his voice.⁷⁰ Looking "immediately grabs us by the

vollzieht sich über das "Hören" der menschlichen Stimme durch das "Ohr" der Natur'. See: Wulf, "Das mimetische Ohr" 12.

⁶⁸ Hahn A., "Reden und Schweigen", *Askese. Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie* 8, 1 (1999) 204–231.

⁶⁹ Nordenfalk C., "Les cinq sens dans l'art du Moyen Âge", *Revue de l'art* 34 (1976) 17–28.

⁷⁰ The tension between voice and silence is given an unusual form of expression when the *Johannesschüssel* is engraved on bells, as in the Dutch example cited by de Blaauw S., "De klok van Segebodus uit Wittewierum. Bloemhof in Slochteren", *Groninger kerken* 26 (2009) 106–109. It was not unusual for bells to be 'personalized'; they were often given names, like that of Mary or other patron saints. Here, the patron saint John the Baptist is also added to the bell iconographically, which instantiates a metonymy between the bell as embodiment of sound and the *Johannesschüssel* as its being silenced. As dispeller of demons, signal, and guardian of hour and time, the symbolic synthesis of bell and dish could not be stronger.

throat" of the *Johannesschüssel*. The decapitation has reduced the vocal cords, the prophet himself, to an accoustic wilderness.

The throat – *gula* in Latin – in most languages makes use of the sound pattern G-R-G. The word *gorgo* is in fact related to this with derivatives in *Gurgel*, *gurguli*, *gorges*, *gorge*.⁷¹ In Indo-European etymology this phonetic root also means 'passage'. The throat is a tube, a tunnel, a passage, a transition. On the basis of this connotation the throat also reflects the uterus, or the dynamics of what has been 'swallowed up' and can be vomited forth again (*hysteria*).⁷² Exorcisms were oriented toward the 'devouring' of evil or illness by the *demon-hysteria*.⁷³ After all, the primary characteristic of the uterus is that it can swell up, can hold or eject considerable quantities of blood. The uterus is seen as a being with tentacles that can spread throughout the entire body, indeed – and not by chance – all the way to the throat.⁷⁴

As a phantasm, G-R-G, or *gorgo*, is thus an entity with the capacity to shrink or swell.⁷⁵ The associations between throat, uterus and the ur-spasmodic movements of life itself run deep.⁷⁶ In Old Testament tradition it is also the place where life – *nepes* – resides.⁷⁷ In this respect it is most telling that *nepes*, a word with a wide semantic range that is often translated as 'soul',⁷⁸ initially denoted 'throat,' the physical locus of the

⁷¹ Root / lemma: g^oer-1, g^oer in [http://indo-european.info/pokorny-etymological-dictionary/index.html].

⁷² See: Kristeva J., *Visions capitales* (Paris: 1998); Schneider L., "Donatello and Caravaggio. The Iconography of Decapitation", *American Imago* 33 (1976); Veith I., *Hysteria. The History of a Disease* (Chicago: 1965).

⁷³ Additional examples in: Ritner R.K., "An Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43, 3 (1984) 209–221, *passim*.

⁷⁴ Leyerle B., "Blood is Seed", *Journal of Religion* 81, 1 (2001) 26–48; Vandenbroeck, *Azetta* 141.

⁷⁵ Loo S. van (ed.), *Gorge(l). Oppression and Relief in Art* (Antwerp: 2007) 112.

⁷⁶ It should be pointed out that the neck is actually a feminine *topos* of vulnerability, not part of the body of the heroine, but of the victim; Boyarin D., *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, (Stanford: 1999) 76, note 36: 'Strictly speaking it is death by piercing or slashing the throat that is marked as "feminine".'

⁷⁷ See: Milgrom J., "Leviticus 1–12: a new translation with introduction and commentary", *The Anchor Bible* 3A (2000) 1472. Milgrom also explicates that *nepes* was first associated with breath (*ruah*), and only secondly and analogously with blood, the other life-containing organ.

⁷⁸ But which ultimately came to denote "life". See: Brozman E.R., "Man and the Meaning of Nephesh", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, 580 (1988) 400–409; Rousseau V., *Le goût du sang. Croyances et polémiques dans la chrétienté occidentale* (Paris: 2005) 23, contends that in ancient Judaism "soul" was interchangeably used for "life", but that in Christianity the soul is more specifically conceptualized as distinct from the body, installing a dual human nature.

breath of life.⁷⁹ To cut the throat of a victim is fundamentally to cut him off from life.⁸⁰ Even today the church of San Giovanni in Venice is called *San Gorgo* by the residents of that neighborhood.⁸¹ The exhibitionism of the *Johannesschüssel* concerns the opening of all possible openings, with the tube of the throat being the most obsessive opening of all. With this G-R-G the *Johannesschüssel* opens the break with life itself, the connecting tunnel that is now cut off. In fact what I am suggesting here is that the exhibitionist drive of the *Johannesschüssel* channels a fascination for the very beginning of life, and hence for the Baptist's life itself.

6. *The Phenomenological Tension between Head and Face*

The last of the problematic issues laid out at the beginning of this essay that still remains to be addressed is the phenomenological tension between head and face, platter and veil.

In Indo-European semantics, the root of 'head' and 'skull' is the same as that of dish, pan, recipient.⁸² Archetypically speaking, heads and skulls are hollow tools for keeping liquids in a cultic context. Head and platter are equal. The head of St John needs its platter, and vice versa. The relation head-platter is intrinsic. Without the charger, the support, the head is suspended and not 'deposited.' Without the platter, John's beheading would never have become an image. Or rather, without the recipient that doubles the head tautologically – receives it, bears it, relinquishes it – the 'snapshot' of the decollation could not have remained frozen in the fraction of that moment, on the threshold, and the head could not have become the image prototype that stores up within itself the energy of the black and gorgonic. The decapitated head that lies bleeding on the ground, decomposes and is forgotten. The platter is the support that has received the image and presents it plastically as *memoria*. The platter says: 'This has happened'. 'Die Schüssel hat damit die Funktion des Kultbildes, nämlich Medium der Erscheinung (der *imago*) des Heiligen zu

⁷⁹ With special thanks to Emma Sidgwick.

⁸⁰ Shaw B.D., "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996) 273, note 10 and 305.

⁸¹ The kinship of Gorgo with gurgling or guttural sounds is preserved here. But Giorgio, Georgios (Joris) is also a guttural sound in some languages. Remember that both dishes were found by Walo of Sartón in Constantinople.

⁸² Root / lemma: (s)kel-1, in <http://www.indoeuropean.nl/index2.html>.

sein'.⁸³ The skull relic is not a crystallized image; it is an unrepresentable taboo. The platter makes the unbounded abyss of the *Johannesschüssels* constant self-exposure bearable and hence viewable. The skull, by contrast, is a unique, unknowable, unviewable, constantly self-destructing, tragic prototype. The *Johannesschüssel* is an object that shamelessly and hence without mediation makes itself felt by the viewer. Or rather, the *Johannesschüssel* presents itself literally by means of the platter, without the intervention of representation.

When the *Johannesschüssel* also began to appear in pictorial form at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, or in relief form like the exemplar in Leuven, the platter bore a 'face' rather than a 'head'. The new medium for the representation of the Baptist's head entailed an even more intense fusion with pictorial elements associated with representations of the face of Christ. This development gradually pried the *Johannesschüssel* loose from its sculptural past and transformed it into a depiction of John's head. The head was given a three-quarter or even a full profile convention. The platter that once formed the key to the *simulacrum* lost its object-like character and became a round frame, a tondo.

In Leuven, the sunken tondo-platter is in turn framed by a lozenge. The edge of the platter thereby becomes part of the image and is framed as such. The platter that became a circle doubled itself in the figure of its opposite: the square or the lozenge. This holds the *Johannesschüssel* firmly in a dynamic between rotation and stability, between performative and permanent, between tactile and beheld, between plastic and pictorial. And as we shall see: between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the *Johannesschüssel* would sink increasingly into 'representation'. Of the once so radical genre of a head on a platter, nothing remains but a safely framed face.

The earliest traces of the production of these painted *tondi*, which inspired around a dozen copies, lead us to the studio of Dirk and Albrecht Bouts in Leuven [Fig. 19].⁸⁴ In the pictorial medium, the head of the Baptist loses its tactile directness but gains in macabre illusion. Idol becomes icon. These late-medieval *tondi* show a frontal visage or face in three-quarter

⁸³ Böhme H., "Die Enthauptung von Johannes dem Täufer", in Geissmar C. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube Hoffnung Liebe Tod* (Klagenfurt: 1995) 384.

⁸⁴ Smeyers M.-K. (ed.), *Dirk Bouts (ca 1410–1475). Een Vlaams primitiefte Leuven* (Leuven: 1998) 568f.



Fig. 19. Albrecht Bouts, *Johannesschüssel* (late 15th century). Oil on wood, diam. 30,5 cm. Oldenburg, Landesmuseum.

profile like a macabre portrait. The platter is replaced by the wooden bearer itself. Illusionism and *paragone* seem to come to the fore.⁸⁵

We presume that these painted *Johannesschüsseln* were also used as retables and exhibited in public, as can be deduced from the following detail from the 1511 Guttentstetten Altarpiece [Fig. 20]. Erhard Altdorfer shows a small congregation praying before an altar.⁸⁶ On the altar is a

⁸⁵ On these mergers, see: Koerner J.L., *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago–London 1993) passim.

⁸⁶ Barb A.A., "Mensa Sacra. The Round Table and the Holy Grail", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 (1956) 61, figs. 10d–10e; Combs Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel" 6, fig. 3; Benesch O., "Erhard Altdorfer als Maler", *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 57 (1936) 157–168; Wiegand E., "Der Meister des Gutenstettener Altares", *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 5 (1938) 125–141, figs. 9–10.



Fig. 20. Erhard Altdorfer, "Veneration of a Johannesschüssel", detail of the Gutenstetten altarpiece (1511). Spruce wood, 106 × 86 cm (each panel). Gutenstetten, parish church. Image © COMBS STUEBE I., "The Johannisschüssel. From Narrative to Reliquary to Andachtsbild", *Marsyas. Studies in the History of Art* 14 (1968–1969) 1–16.

platter with the head of St John. This source demonstrates the para-liturgical function of the late medieval *Johannesschüsseln*. But there is more. The artist has painted the head as a head of flesh and blood, and not as the artifact it must obviously have been. In the severed head, the artist has pushed his imitation of reality to a hyper-realistic extreme, so that it calls forth the actual presentation upon which the represented object is based, and enacted mentally in the religious interaction between spectator and object.⁸⁷ Because the head of St John the Baptist was venerated as a prefiguration of the body of Christ, and even *as* the body of Christ, the precursor of Christ therefore preceded Him in sacrifice.

The *vera icon* has always belonged to the world of woven fluidity; the *Johannesschüssel*, to the fixed world of stone. But John's head could not enter entirely into Christ's world without removing its cloak of three-dimensionality. This ultimate step – the exchange of medium – was the necessary sacrifice for a complete *in utroque*. The *Johannesschüssel* would now become the re-presenting (and not presenting) image of death. By the end of the medieval and beginning of the early modern periods, the two men are fused into one single prototype, emphasizing the importance of masculinity sacrificed and salvation by blood in Christian salvation history.

A specific variant of this medium shift and the influence of humanistic pictorial theory is visible in Italy. The tondo by Giovanni Bellini in the Musei Civici of Pesaro (1464–1468, formerly in the sacristy of S. Giovanni in Pesaro) forms the link in this late-medieval phenomenon between northern and southern visual traditions [Fig. 21].⁸⁸ Its morphology refers to the northern *tondi*. However, there is no longer any suggestion that the head lies on a platter. Instead, it appears to be suspended in a vacuum. The head is painted with a 'spectacular' *raccourci*, transforming the neck wound into a morbid cynosure.⁸⁹ Bellini's work shows the extent to which

⁸⁷ Krüger K., "Gesichter ohne Leib. Dispositive der gewesenen Präsenz", in Suthor N. – Fischer-Lichte E. (eds.), *Verklärte Körper. Ästhetiken der Transfiguration* (Munich: 2002) 183–222.

⁸⁸ Combs Stuebe, "The Johannesschüssel" 10. The *tondo* was formerly attributed to Mantegna; Paccagnini G., *Andrea Mantegna* (Mantua: 1961) 90–91. It has recently been connected with Marco Zoppo; see also Ghiotto R., *Bellini (I classici dell'arte)*, 38 (Milan: 2004). Bellini may have known the medieval relief of the head of St John on the baptistery of the San Marco in Venice, but the *tondo* does not derive from the relief. San Marco also possessed a skull relic of John the Baptist, though it attracted fewer pilgrims than the Amiens relic.

⁸⁹ Ridolfi C., *Le Maraviglie dell'Arte* (Venice: 1648) 40–41, tells the anecdote of a sultan who saw a Johannesschüssel painted by his brother Gentile and complained to the artist about the incorrect anatomy of the severed neck. To press home his point, he ordered the beheading of a slave and showed the result to the artist.



Fig. 21. Giovanni Bellini, *Testa di San Giovanni* (between 1464–1468). Tempera on wood, diam. 28 cm. Pesaro, San Giovanni, sacristia.

this subject becomes a focus of the quintessence of painterly possibilities, and how this isolated head thereby becomes the *Andachtsbild* of pictorial illusionism, the ultimate paragon of decollation. In the sobering features of the agonies of death and the emphasis on the neck, the *tondo* links up with the Medusa genre.⁹⁰ And after all, did we not consider the very essence of the *Johannesschüssel* to be the image of abyss and absorption?

⁹⁰ Karakostas D., *La figure mythique de Méduse dans la littérature européenne* (diss. Université Panthéon-Sorbonne 2002); Huot S., "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose. Mythographic Program and Ovidian Intertext", *Speculum* 62 (1987) 865–877; Stafford B.M., "Medusa or the Physiognomy of the Earth. Humbert de Superville's Cosmological Aesthetics", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972) 308–338; Wilk S.R., *Medusa. Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (Oxford: 2000).

We can lose ourselves shamelessly in its dark openings. Does this visual penetration not precisely mirror the impact of the *apotropaion*? Is not this throat and open mouth with lolling tongue a remembrance of ancient Medusa?

Julia Kristeva calls the Medusa myth the archetype of the assumption of form and matter, as incarnation indeed.⁹¹ In fact, the early Renaissance reinvents the *Johannesschüssel* on the back of the Medusa archetype,⁹² making it the essence of painting and art in general: the very birth of the image as powerful gaze. Or as Christiane Kruse has pointed out: 'Der Kopf der Gorgo ist immer zweidimensional und frontal, eine Oberfläche ohne Profil und Volumen, er ist, wie die Verstorbenen in der Unterwelt, ein Schatten (eidolon), nicht tastbar und ohne Substanz'.⁹³ In that sense, the *Johannesschüssel tondo* touches on the matter of "mediality" separating the medieval and early modern periods in the most fundamental way.

Coda

In an early sixteenth-century drawing by Guercino, which depicts angels worshipping Veronica's *sudarium*, we see a peculiar "iconogenetic" resonance between John and Christ [Fig. 22].⁹⁴ Below the *vera icon*, shrouded in shadow on a wooden table, lies the head of the Baptist on a platter. The head is like a black ink stain, formless, erased and melting into its own medium of shadow, in order that the true face may appear, made visible in the medium of the sharp line, of circumscription. After making a lengthy progress from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, the meaning of the bond between the *Johannesschüssel* and the Veronica has culminated in the waxing and waning of visibility itself. The word made flesh, the face, must increase, but the voice, the head, must dec(r)ease. The head on a platter turns out to be a fading object, an image that appeals to the sense

⁹¹ Kristeva, *Visions capitales* 40.

⁹² This intercultural and ethnographic-anthropological angle was developed in my article "The Head on a Plate. John the Baptist and the Image of the Precursor and the Mediator", *The Annual of the Antwerp Royal Museum* (2006) 9–41. See also: Marin L., *Détruire la peinture* (Paris: 1977) 139–199.

⁹³ Kruse C., *Wozu Menschen malen. Historische Begründungen eines Bildmediums* (Munich: 2003) 397.

⁹⁴ Princeton University, Art Museum; Combs Stuebe, "The Johannisschüssel" 11, fig. 10; Wolf G., "Teller und Tuch, Haupt und Gesicht", in Geissmar C. – Louis E. (eds.), *Glaube Hoffnung Liebe Tod* (Vienna: 1998) 397–398.



Fig. 22. Guercino, *Vera icon and Johannesschüssel* (between 1591–1666). Oil on copper, 28,5 × 24 cm. Princeton, Princeton University Art Museum.

of hearing. The head on a platter is an ephemeral echo that will soon transform itself, in the persistence of sight, into a face on a veil.

In this article, I proposed to regard the *Johannesschüssel* as an *Andachtsbild*, as the gaze of death. This interpretation of the *Johannesschüssel* as the image at the threshold, at the gate, as both historical and cosmological (as solstice), has implications for the relationship between image and gaze as well as for artistic theory. Metaphorically speaking, the *Johannesschüssel* relates to the archetypal idiom in which images were unmediated and the impact of figurative art was believed to be so great that it could kill (Medusa). It has not yet reached this countenance of the incarnation – visibility – but it is already removed from the all-destructive face, which is consequently forbidden by law – invisibility. The extinguished iris is freed

from the fatal impact of the figurative and is, *at the same time*, not yet that first living gaze of the incarnated face. This zero point on the threshold, this *Mittlerfunktion*, is where the *Johannesschüssel* rests. On account of this function and significance, the head of the Baptist resides in *rigor mortis*, but simultaneously promises new life in the *vera icon*.

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CHASING THE *CAPUT*.
HEAD IMAGES OF JOHN THE BAPTIST IN A POLITICAL CONFLICT

Mateusz Kapustka

One of the difficulties with using iconographical methods in the history of medieval art is their ineffectiveness in dealing with individual cases of the reuse of images and the decontextualizing effects of quotation. Medievalists often stand at a confusing hermeneutical crossroads between, on the one hand, 'reading' images as a descriptive process of systematic assignment of meanings to forms and, on the other, 'understanding' objects, and alterations in their materiality, as a way of comprehending the unpredictable dynamics of cultural change.¹ The relevance of such divergent and flexible approaches as art patronage and politics, images and shifts of power, and resonances between public iconography and individual intention, have suffered a long period of neglect in art history due to the domination of iconographical, logo-centric research on images. We cannot quote all of the discipline's breakthrough moments in this respect, such as George Kubler's elaborations on the different time modes of the objects over the course of history, or David Freedberg's studies in the theory of response, both of which saved images from the burden of semiotics and paved the way for the anthropological studies of images and their changing meanings that is now current.² But let us mention in this respect the prominent statement by Horst Bredekamp from his brilliant short analysis of Donatello's *Judith with Holofernes*, a Florentine masterpiece that will appear several times in our study. Bredekamp investigated the changing levels of its political efficacy as an ambivalent image of decapitation and thus surgically demystified the assumption of its inherent 'image magic' by pointing to ethnographical origins of the previous research. The conclusion was that it was 'precisely the *forms* of images that determined

¹ I am referring here to the titles of two introductory essays by Elisabeth Sears and Thelma K. Thomas in: Sears E. – Thomas T.T. (eds.), *Reading Medieval Images. The Art Historian and the Object* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: 2003) 1–7, 9–15. I would like to express my thanks to Warren Th. Woodfin for the revision of my text.

² Kubler G., *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: 1962); Freedberg D., *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: 1989).

whether these worked in a representational or in a magical way'.³ Two polarities of interpretation are relevant to our investigation: one the so-called 'magic of the image', and the other the use of established modes of pictorial representation as a tool for the public appropriation of power. The present study accordingly raises the question of reuse of a certain visual potential that had long been part of the public visual culture, and examines ways in which beholders' existing visual experience could be reshaped in accordance with political premises. The depictions analysed show the head of John the Baptist, which gives an additional charge to the process of argumentative quotation studied, since representations of a severed head necessarily share in the ambivalent status of any images of fragmentation. Such partial images appear as sovereign substitutes for the body, but at the same time they work intensively as relative references exactly because of their unsettling visual incompleteness. It is in terms of such visual fluctuations that we shall trace the reception history of the head of John the Baptist and those depictions of it that functioned as political emblems of power in the Silesian capital of Wrocław (Breslau) in the Late Middle Ages.⁴

The public display of images of John's head by the municipal authorities of this city, which was also the see of the local bishopric, can be regarded as a source of tension between the secular and the ecclesiastical powers. In Wrocław's cathedral of St. John some fragments of bone said to be from the saint's skull had been preserved 'in disco', that is to say within a reliquary in the common shape of the so-called *Johannesschüssel*, since at least 1428.⁵ Permanent possession of these head relics was an argument in support of episcopal authority. The same relics were to a certain degree decontextualized as depictions in the public space of the city multiplied for purpose of legitimization of the secular political power, and in this

³ Bredekamp H., *Repräsentation und Bildmagie der Renaissance als Formproblem. Erweiterte Fassung eines Vortrags gehalten in der Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung am 29. Juni 1993* (Munich: 1995) 7–29 (here: 8). Cf. Bredekamp's recent modification of his view on images' agency in favor of images that are able to live and act by themselves: Bredekamp H., *Theorie des Bildakts. Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007* (Berlin: 2010).

⁴ This article is meant as a pilot study of a broader project on this subject to be further conducted by the author.

⁵ For the iconographical type of *Johannesschüssel* see Barbara Baert's contribution in this volume. For its various contexts: Arndt H. – Kroos R., "Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel", *Aachener Kunstblätter* 38 (1969) 243–328; Combs Stuebe I., "The 'Johannis-schüssel': from Narrative to Reliquary to 'Andachtsbild'", *Marsyas* 14 (1968/69) 1–16; Baert B., "A Head on a Platter. The 'Johannesschüssel' or the Image of the Mediator and Precursor", *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* 43 (2006) 8–41.

way the secular authorities were in a sense able to annex them. This very special political case seems, therefore, to include a metamorphosis of particles of the saint's body into an image of the full head, which in turn became a corporeal argument within a struggle of two corporate bodies.

The city of Wrocław, together with almost the whole of Silesia, had since 1335 been subject to the crown of Bohemia, due to the expansionist politics of the House of Luxembourg.⁶ Soon after the middle of the fifteenth century, the city was given the opportunity to assume the role of last fortress of the Catholic faith in the whole region. The capital of the Silesian crown province of Bohemia strongly opposed George of Podiebrady, the Hussite king elected in 1457, and even proclaimed an anti-Hussite crusade. At the same time, Pope Pius II was facing the enormous crisis brought on by the Turkish capture of Constantinople four years earlier, and proclaimed his own plans for an anti-Turkish *cruciata* at the Congress of Mantua in 1459. Wrocław, a city strongly opposed to the Hussites, became the pope's only acceptable ally in Central Europe able to guarantee the political stability and permanence of the old faith in a region that had been successfully seized by the Hussite revolutionaries. This political situation naturally had a strong influence on the municipal administration of Wrocław, which did not scruple to present itself before the Holy See under the name of the Advocate of the Roman Faith, and consistently projected this image over several decades.⁷ This stance was not to be without consequences for our history of 'disembodied heads'.

⁶ For more information on the political history of this land as well as the local manifestations of Luxembourg rule in fourteenth and fifteenth century art see recently: Kapustka M. – Klipa J. – Kozieł A. – Oszczanowski P. – Vlnas V. (eds.), *Silesia – a Pearl in the Crown of Bohemia. History – Culture – Art* (Prague: 2006) 23–79, 97–113 (essays by Lenka Bobková and Radek Fukala, and by Milena Bartlová); Kaczmarek R., "Schlesien: die luxemburgische Erwerbung", in Fajt J. (ed.), *Karl IV. Kaiser von Gottes Gnaden. Kunst und Repräsentation des Hauses Luxemburg 1310–1437* (Munich: 2006) 308–317.

⁷ On the political turbulence of this particular period and its effect on local art used as a tool of political argumentation see: Czechowicz B., "Wratislavia, caput coronae regni Bohemiae"? Praga i Wrocław w artystycznym dialogu w XV wieku", in Kapustka M. – Kozieł A. – Oszczanowski P. (eds.), *Śląsk i Czechy. Wspólne drogi sztuki*, Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis 2953 (Wrocław: 2007) 151–161; idem, *Między katedrą a ratuszem. Polityczne uwarunkowania sztuki Wrocławia u schyłku średniowiecza* (Warszawa: 2008) passim. For the situation directly following the city's conflict with Podiebrad see: Czechowicz B., "Matthias Korvin und das Breslauer Rathaus. Ausgewählte Probleme", in Sachs R. (ed.), *Amator scientiae. Festschrift für Dr. Peter Ohr* (Wrocław: 2004) 39–51; Czechowicz B. – Kapustka M., "Hope and Pragmatism. The Rule and Visual Representation of Matthias Corvinus in Silesia and Lusatia", in Farbaky P. – Végh A. (eds.), *Matthias Corvinus the King. Tradition and Renewal in the Hungarian Royal Court, 1458–1490*, exhibition catalogue, Medieval Department of the Budapest History Museum (Budapest: 2008) 77–87.



Fig. 1. The coats-of-arms of the city of Wrocław in the form from 1530. Coloured graphics. Photo after: Karl Adolph Menzel, *Topographische Chronik von Breslau*, 1805.

The image of the head of John the Baptist on a platter was among the most important forms of emblematic representation of Silesia's capital across the whole High and Late Middle Ages and was eventually set as the central charge on the city's coat of arms as approved by the Emperor Ferdinand I in 1530. In this grant of arms, it was accompanied by the Bohemian lion, the Silesian eagle, the letter 'W', and the bust of John the Evangelist in four marshalled sections [Fig. 1].⁸ But even earlier, at the end of the thirteenth century, the motif of John's figure and especially of his

⁸ Łagiewski M., *Herb Wrocławia w architekturze miasta* (Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków: 1992) 15–63; cf. Wrzesińska J., "Problematyka heraldyczna w gotyckiej architekturze Wrocławia", in Świechowski Z. (ed.), *Z dziejów sztuki śląskiej* (Warszawa: 1978) 203–246.

severed head was used on its own on the city council's official seal, long before the municipal heraldry had been definitively established. Moreover, the multiple displays of this head image within the visually layered structure of the decoration of Wrocław Town Hall (built well before the 1530 grant of arms) seems to testify that this public 'head policy' did not result directly from the gradually emerging shape of the city's coat of arms, as the historical and art-historical literature has assumed for almost a century. I would argue instead that, due to their continual and growing multiplication, the sculpted heads of John the Baptist in the late-medieval city of Wrocław show an interesting precedent of derivative embedding of a relic's image into the new context of municipal power.

Head Images as Visual Topoi of Punishment

The Late Gothic decoration of the Town Hall was the result of several building phases [Fig. 2].⁹ Some parts of the building are of particular interest of our study. We will look first at the eastern part that included the council's chapel and the municipal court (the so-called *praetorium*), built around the middle of the fourteenth century, which incorporates a politically composed tympanum decoration with the Bohemian lion as a bearer of the city's emblems [Fig. 3].¹⁰ Then we will examine the later architectonic and sculptural elements of the period roughly from 1470 to 1510, such as the whole southern wing comprising three oriels, added to

⁹ Burgemeister L., *Das Breslauer Rathaus* (Breslau: 1913); Stein R., *Das Rathaus und der Grosse Ring zu Breslau* (Breslau: 1937); Bimler K., *Das Breslauer Rathaus: seine Gestaltung, Ausstattung und Baugeschichte* (Breslau: 1941); Bukowski M. – Zlat M., *Ratusz wrocławski* (Wrocław: 1958); Zlat M., *Das Rathaus zu Wrocław* (Wrocław: 1977); cf. Walter E., "Zur sakralen Ikonographie des Breslauer Rathauses und zur Umwandlung der beiden kleineren gotischen Ostgiebel dieses Bauwerkes in Renaissancegiebel", *Archiv für schlesische Kirchengeschichte* 23 (1965) 49–84; Bartetzky A., "Die Beziehungen zwischen Stadt und Krone im Spiegel der Rathausdekorationen des Spätmittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit (Prag, Breslau, Krakau, Posen)", in Dmitrieva M. – Lambrecht K. (eds.), *Krakau, Prag und Wien. Funktionen von Metropolen im frühmodernen Staat*, Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Mitteleuropa 10 (Stuttgart: 2000) 45–58 (here: 48–52).

¹⁰ Jurkowlanec T., "Ostportal des Rathauses in Breslau (Wrocław)", in Benešová K. (ed.), *King John of Luxembourg and the Art of his Era (1296–1346)* (Prague: 1998) 178–180; Kaczmarek R., "Portal z tympanonem w fasadzie wschodniej ratusza we Wrocławiu. Przyczynek do ikonografii lwa w hełmie", in Kalinowski L. – Mossakowski S. (eds.), *Nobile claret opus. Studia z dziejów sztuki dedykowane Mieczysławowi Zlatowi*, Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis 2016 (Wrocław: 1998) 95–105. Cf. Jurkowlanec T., "Wystrój rzeźbiarski praetorium we Wrocławiu. Ze studiów nad rzeźbą architektoniczną z. tercji XIV wieku na Śląsku", *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 21 (1995) 181–222.



Fig. 2. Wrocław Town Hall, view from the south-eastern corner (decoration from the mid-14th century and ca. 1470–1510). Image © M. Wiślocki.

the building's earlier structure in the 1480s and 1490s [Fig. 4], together with the separate figures of the city beadle, the Roland, and the pillory at the eastern front of the Town Hall.

To begin with, let us outline how John's head was depicted on the Town Hall in its earliest version: in the *praetorium*, under the eastern chapel oriel [Fig. 5; 6]. From 1345 onwards the interior of the oriel contained an altar consecrated to both John the Evangelist and John the Baptist. This housed two of the most important reliquaries of the municipal administration, both made around 1400: the magnificent bust of Saint Dorothea and the small statue of John the Baptist.¹¹ Exactly below this oriel, a relief of the

¹¹ Hintze E. – Masner K., *Goldschmiedearbeiten Schlesiens: eine Auswahl von Goldschmiedearbeiten schlesischer Herkunft oder aus schlesischem Besitze* (Breslau: 1911) 3–5; Pechstein K. – Effmert V., *Schlesische Goldschmiedearbeiten im Germanischen Nationalmuseum*



Fig. 3. The so-called *praetorium* of Wrocław Town Hall (mid-14th century). Image © M. Wiśłocki.

platter with John's head is held by the angels in the distinctive liturgical gesture of ostension of relics by means of cloths or veils. When the central oriel window is opened, the vault ribs can be seen, with the keystone in the form of an image of John's head which faces outwards, guaranteeing a frontal view of the saint's face for the beholders remaining outside, thus demonstrating the saint's perpetual presence in the altar space. It would be simplistic to view the pictorial presence of John's head in the Town Hall only in terms of piety. We need to bear in mind that only the head images of the local patron – none of the other images – were repeated in the Town Hall in this way over the course of some 150 years [Fig. 7]. This situation is of special relevance if we factor in that the real owner of John's

(Nürnberg: 1990) cat. no. 1.; Regulska G., *Gotyckie złotnictwo na Śląsku*, Studia Instytutu Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk 7 (Warszawa: 2001) 169–170.



Fig. 4. The oriel at the south-eastern corner of Wrocław Town Hall (1480/90).
Photograph by the author.



Fig. 5. The oriel on the eastern façade of Wrocław Town Hall (ca. 1345). Photograph by the author.

head relics, the cathedral chapter of Wrocław, remained in a permanent struggle with the municipal council. Let us then consider this unusual case of the use of visual representation to transfer the authority vested in relics from the possessors of the relics themselves to their rivals within local power structures.

John the Baptist, due to his clear role as a precursor of Christ, was a perfect saint for representational frames of medieval municipal order.



Fig. 6a. Unknown artist, *Head of John the Baptist held by the angels on a cloth* (ca. 1345). Relief plaque under the oriel on the eastern façade of Wrocław Town Hall. Photograph by the author.

In the Middle Ages, the social reception of judicial and executive power was often conditioned by the appropriate means of its visualisation. According to the *Legenda aurea*, John functioned as a 'Lantern of God' and 'Herald of the Judge'.¹² These connotations were not without significance for the symbolic sacralisation of the city's judicial domain, which was often expressed by means of depictions of the Last Judgement (as may also have been the case in Wrocław Town Hall in the form of a wall painting).¹³ Both John's actions and his death became the last announcements of the new order, the culmination of which will be a forensic assessment of spiritual gains and losses. In this context, it is particularly remarkable that it is not the full-length figure of John as a patron that is designed to play the crucial visual role in Wrocław Town Hall, but it is rather his head image, relating to a specific fragment of his body. Although this alluded to the

¹² Marrow J.H., "John the Baptist, Lantern for the Lord. A Supplement", *Oud Holland* 85 (1970) 188–193.

¹³ Bukowski – Zlat, *Ratusz wrocławski* 228.



Fig. 6b. Unknown artist, *Head of John the Baptist* (ca. 1345). Vault keystone relief inside the oriel on the eastern façade of Wrocław Town Hall. Image © J. Buława.



Fig. 7. Unknown artist, *Head of John the Baptist on a platter held by the angels* (1481). Tympanum of one of the windows of the southern façade of Wrocław Town Hall. Photograph by the author.

most important Silesian relic of the patron, its importance in the new context has also been connected directly with the meaning of the saint's biblical execution. Like Christ's cross, the severed head of John serves in this context as a sign of final victory of the divine power over an act of arbitrary injustice, as it was precisely through his martyrdom that John defeated the unjust king Herod.¹⁴ By making this the symbol of municipal power, the original signification of the actual relic as an ecclesiastic carrier of identity was deprived of its exclusive individuality and became an emblem of the higher justice. The multiplied image of the head of John the Baptist, the patron of those under sentence of death, builds within its new framework an embodiment of the beheading and visually indicates the *praetorium* as a place of the official reading of the city law, the pronouncements of the city court and their enforcement. Those awaiting the

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. the Saint's monumental victory over Herodes as depicted in the central panel of Giovanni del Biondo's John the Baptist altarpiece of 1360–65, now in the Uffizi, Florence.

honourable punishment of execution by decapitation, whose patron was John, were in some cases accompanied by a priest and given a glass of wine – ‘vino pro amoris s. joanni’ – immediately before their execution.¹⁵ John the Baptist here seems to have played a similar role to that of the famous Florentine Compagnia dei Neri, whose members accompanied prisoners sentenced to death, equipped with portable plates often depicting their patron and the scene of his beheading.¹⁶

Against this background, the head image becomes in Wrocław not merely an archetypal visualisation or simple symbol of decapitation. In this case it is worth considering to what extent it is linked to the problem of attestation of judgment and justification of punishment. John the Baptist's role as predecessor has been remarkably modified in Wrocław in the course of developing this image propaganda. On the south-eastern oriel, directly adjoining the area of the *praetorium*, the sculpted head of the saint held by an angel was ostentatiously installed in 1480/90 as a counterpart for the Annunciation scene made at the same time [Fig. 8]. This might, therefore, be read as a physical attestation to the earthly condemnation of the saint being a symbolic complement and a secondary confirmation of Christ's mission, initiated at the very first moment of Incarnation, giving the legislative and executive power in general a key place in the history of Salvation. It might have assumed a role of visual certification of a court sentence, aimed at the preservation of the common law as warranted by the higher order, a sentence or even a seal of attestation that was permanently discernible from a distance. In these terms, this adaptation of the biblical head image might have implied an idea of a divine seal of authentication of the act of punishment. This idea must have gained in importance after the political life of the city was thoroughly shaken up

¹⁵ *Scriptores Rerum Silesiacarum*, vol. 12: Wächter F. (ed.), *Geschichtsschreiber Schlesiens des XV. Jahrhunderts* (Breslau: 1883) 137 (the case of decapitation of Prince Nicolaus of Opole in Nysa in 1497).

¹⁶ Apart from the well documented history of the Florentine confraternity I Neri in S. Maria della Croce in Tempio itself, cf. on the meaning of its *tavolette* as images of comfort for the condemned to death: Edgerton S.Y., “A little known ‘Purpose of Art’ in the Italian Renaissance”, *Art History* 2 (1979) 45–61; Falvey K.C., “Early Italian Dramatic Traditions and Comforting Rituals: Some Initial Considerations”, in Eisenbichler K. (ed.), *Crossing the Boundaries. Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities*, Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series 15 (Kalamazoo–Michigan: 1991) 33–55; resp. in the context of Bernardo Daddi's magnificent cross depicting three simultaneous decapitations: of John, Paul and Jacob the Elder that also functioned as an image of consolation: Ciatti M., (ed.), *La croce di Bernardo Daddi del Museo Poldi Pezzoli. Ricerche e conservazione*, Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Opificio delle Pietre Dure e Laboratori di Restauro di Firenze (Florence: 2005) esp. 11–51.



Fig. 8. Unknown artist, *Head of John the Baptist on a platter held by an angel and the Annunciation* (1480/1490). Relief underneath the oriel on the south-eastern corner of Wrocław Town Hall. Photograph by the author.

in 1491, with the startling decision of the magistracy of Wrocław to behead its own leader, Heinz Dompnig, accused of treason and fraud during the city's bitter conflict with Matthias Corvinus. The dispute revolved around questions of the legislative competencies of the parties involved, the court's majestic dignity, as well as the constitution of fiefs.¹⁷

Enhancing an Aura: The Head Relic and the Bilateral Claims to Power

The issue of the Wrocław head images of John the Baptist as media of power can, despite all the obvious differences, to some extent be analysed in comparison to the contemporary or even later depictions of beheading in the municipal domain of Renaissance Florence, a city that happened also to be under the patronage of John the Baptist. The Florentine example is a comparatively well-investigated case study of ambiguous connotations of *poenitentia* in the domain of the agency of the image. We now take almost as archetypes of the late-medieval and early-modern visual culture of punishment such works as Donatello's *Judith with Holofernes* of 1453–57 (already mentioned above). It was placed as a gaze-focusing *spolium* in front of the Palazzo della Signoria and equipped with a republican

¹⁷ Markgraf H., "Heinz Dompnig, der Breslauer Hauptmann (†1491)", *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Geschichte und Altertum Schlesiens* 20 (1886) 157–196. Cf. recently on its political context: Czechowicz – Kapustka "Hope and pragmatism" 77.

inscription by the citizens of Florence after the expulsion of the Medici from the city in 1495.¹⁸

In contrast to the Florentine case, where, generally speaking, the dominant tension shaping the city's public life was the rivalry between the civic administration and princely ambition, the dynamic role of depictions of the Baptist's head as images of justice in medieval Wrocław raises the question of the reception of politically inflected visual quotations in the public space. It also points to the open competition between the city and the ecclesiastical authority of the bishop and the cathedral chapter. In Wrocław, unlike Florence, the dynamics of political tension coalesced around a particular sacred object, a part of the saint's body, which was subject to contention and was reinterpreted accordingly. The cathedral of Wrocław identified itself first and foremost as the possessor of relics of John the Baptist. The political history of the local bishopric had been shaped by this fact. Even before the head relic was acquired, a physical remnant of John the Baptist was present in the form of the little forefinger reliquary of the saint, which had been donated to the cathedral possibly already in 1351 by the Emperor Charles IV, of the House of Luxembourg, in the capacity of king of Bohemia, thus symbolically binding the local Church hierarchy to his imperial plans.¹⁹ The sculpted figures and multiple head images of John the Baptist in the Gothic cathedral of the mid-fourteenth to fifteenth century also reference the tradition of the previous Romanesque cathedral of St. John in the same location. In the fifteenth century, these images legitimized by long tradition already stood in radical contrast to the newly reinterpreted head image of the saint adopted within the municipal milieu as the secular magistracy's visual device, a device that was beginning to function as an emblem of the city as a whole. The early-modern reliquaries later commissioned for the cathedral should be interpreted as a restatement of the cathedral's possession of the relics, and also demonstrate the undiminished power of

¹⁸ For the detailed history of this group, Donatello's most discussed, see: Caglioti F., *Donatello e i Medici: storia del David e della Giuditta*, Studi della Fondazione Carlo Marchi per la Diffusione della Cultura e del Civismo in Italia 14 (Firenze: 2000); cf. i.a. McHam S.B., "Donatello's Bronze David and Judith as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence", *The Art Bulletin* 83 (2001) 32–47; Terry A., "Donatello's Decapitations and the Rhetoric of Beheading in Medicean Florence", *Renaissance Studies* 23,5 (2009) 609–638.

¹⁹ Regulska, Gotyckie złotnictwo 155–156; Kapustka M., "Reliquary for the Forefinger of St. John the Baptist", in Niedzielenko A. – Vlnas V. (eds.), *Silesia – a Pearl in the Crown of Bohemia, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery in Prague and Copper Museum in Legnica* (Prague: 2006) 115.



Fig. 9. Caspar Pfister, *Head of John the Baptist on a platter* (1611). Reliquary. Treasury of the Wrocław Cathedral. Photo after Ch. Gündel.

the ecclesiastical claim to tradition. One of them, the precious reliquary in the form of John's head on a platter, made by Caspar Pfister in 1611, possibly repeats the then already archaic form of a lost Gothic reliquary of 1428 [Fig. 9].²⁰

²⁰ The relics contained in a *Johannesschüssel* came to Wrocław possibly in the time of the Hussite wars, as noted by Kundmann in: *Promptuarium Rerum Naturalium et Artificialium Vratislaviense Præcipue / Quas Collegit D. Io. Christianus Kundmann Medicus Vratislaviensis* (Vratislaviæ, Hubertus: 1726) 5. For two early modern replicas or emulations of the original *Johannesschüssel* in the cathedral, meant as repositories for the relics of the saint's head and arm and dating to 1571 and 1611 respectively, cf. Hintze E. – Masner K., *Goldschmiedearbeiten Schlesiens* 16, 22; Gündel Ch., *Die Goldschmiedekunst in Breslau* (Berlin: 1942) 22; Starzewska M. (ed.), *Ornamenta Silesiae. Tysiąc lat rzemiosła artystycznego na Śląsku*, collections catalogue, Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu (Wrocław: 2000) cat. no. 92.

This archaism highlights the continuity of the head relic as a locus of the cathedral church's identity. The way in which the images of John the Baptist's head were displayed in the cathedral gave the fragments of bone meaningful visual features and also demonstrated to the outside viewer the power of the custodian of the relics. One of these images was interestingly combined with a motif of the Holy Face of Christ in form of a *Vera Icon*. These two holy faces are represented on two external window keystones sculpted in 1340–50 and placed opposite to each other across the cathedral's pseudo-transept, defined by a broader arcade [Fig. 10]. This reciprocal conditioning of images of relics is not accidental: the transept, as a visually and topographically distinct part of the church building, has since the origins of Christian architecture functioned as a place of veneration of martyrs' graves and of the ostension of relics and votive offerings, as Richard Krautheimer has pointed out in his research on the Early Christian basilica.²¹ This context gains additional relevance in our case. The two images, that of the sacred cloth with the imprint of Christ's face and that of the saint's severed head, seem to be dialectically related to each other with respect to their functioning as visual media. Moreover, they constitute in this case a visual combination of material objects, which integrate the aura of the sacred traces together with the completed history of salvation. The separated head of John is the last historical indication of Christ's precursor's bodily sacrifice, and the *sudarium* is a significant answer to the question of the Saviour's corporeal resurrection as announced by John's baptismal mission. The textile trace of the body depicted here could be venerated in Rome, while the physical remnant depicted could be venerated *in situ*, so both focused the gaze on material evidence for sacred power. In this way, both the cathedral of Wrocław and later (as we will see) the city's Town Hall draw a visual correspondence between the two relics on the basis of strictly political purposes.²² It should also not be surprising

²¹ Krautheimer R., "The Transept in the Early Christian Basilica", in Krautheimer R. (ed.), *Studies in Early Christian, Medieval, and Renaissance Art* (London–New York: 1969) 59–68 (esp. 59–60, 61, 62–64). For the building history of the Wrocław cathedral: Bukowski M., *Katedra wrocławska. Architektura, rozwój, zniszczenie, odbudowa* (Wrocław: 1962); idem, *Katedra wrocławska* (Wrocław: 1974). On its sculptural decoration with figures of John the Baptist and relief depictions of his head cf. Kaczmarek R., *Rzeźba architektoniczna XIV wieku we Wrocławiu*, Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis 2015 (Wrocław: 1999) Historia sztuki, 12. 1999) passim.

²² The connection between John's head and Abgar's Mandylion shown as a textile relic resembling the *Vera Icon* in its ostentatious presentation appears in form of a direct juxtaposition in the early modern period in the monument in the church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome commemorating the restoration of the church in 1596 as well as in the graphical depiction of this local alliance, in which the Mandylion was literally trans-



Fig. 10a. Unknown artist, *Vera icon held by the angels* (ca. 1340–50). Keystone relief of the northern window of the pseudo-transept of Wrocław Cathedral. Photograph by the author.

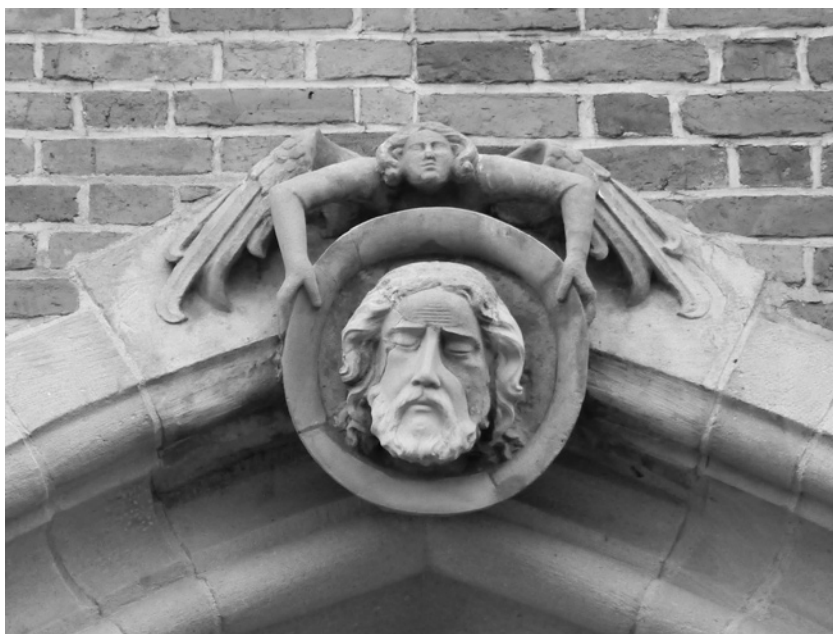


Fig. 10b. Unknown artist, *Head of John the Baptist on a platter* (ca. 1340–50). Keystone relief of the southern window of the pseudo-transept of Wrocław Cathedral. Photograph by the author.

that within such a topographically defined space of tension between the two bilaterally placed keystone-images of the *caput* in the cathedral, on its north side, almost below the *Vera Icon*, there is a portico that served as a place of the Episcopal court's pronouncements.²³ The unquestionable authority of holy countenances emanating from the images gave this jurisdictional locale an aura of sacred presence.

The Wrocław city council that adorned its Town Hall with various representations of John's head clearly did not intend to secularize this image entirely as a profane municipal antithesis of the sacred. On the one hand, laying claim to the most precious relic of the city's patron in spite of its secure ecclesiastical exclusiveness was a highly effective and thus understandable strategy.²⁴ On the other hand, the general phenomenon of the sacralisation of the office of the town council through the medium of suitable attributes of governance played a decisive role here. A comparison with the well known and well documented example of the Florentine Signoria provides a broader context for understanding both the means used to give expression to municipal rule and their reception, and hence throw an interesting light on the 'speaking' features of medieval Town Hall decorations in general. The Signoria, though equipped with the highest power, remained invisible to the citizens. Even when it communicated with the public, its resolutions were mediated, being delivered by the city's notary or the Captain, or alternatively through the voice of the heralds. It was precisely this combination of permanent presence with simultaneous invisibility or inaudibility – except on feast days – that

formed into Veronica, in the frontispiece engraving of: Giachetti G., *Iconologia Salvatoris et Karilogia Praecursoris, sive De Imagine Salvatoris ad Regem Abgarum missa, et de Capite S. Joannis Baptistae* Rome, Jacobus Mascardus: 1628 – see: Arndt – Kroos, "Zur Ikonographie der Johannesschüssel" 302; Ragusa I., "The Edessan Image in S. Silvestro in Capite in the Seventeenth Century", in Cadei A. (ed.), *Arte d'Occidente: temi e metodi* (Rome: 1999) 939–946; Baert B., "Head on a Platter" 26. Cf. recently eadem, "He must increase, but I must decrease". On the Spiritual and Pictorial Intertwining between the 'Johannesschüssel' and the 'Vera icon' (1200–1500)", in Enenkel K. – Melion W. (eds.), *Meditatio – Refashioning the Self: Theory and Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual Culture*, Intersections. Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture 17 (Leiden: 2011) 323–366.

²³ Cf. Walter E., "Zum Kaiserchor des Breslauer Domes", *Archiv für Schlesische Kirchengeschichte* 25 (1967) 128–166. Cf. idem, "Zur Baugeschichte des Langhauses und des Kleinchores sowie zum *fons sacer* des Breslauer Domes", *Archiv für Schlesische Kirchengeschichte* 30 (1972) 70–92.

²⁴ Cf. the case of jurisdictional conflict between ecclesiastical authorities about the exclusive possession of the skull relics of St. Denis in the beginning of the fifteenth century as well as its possible visual repercussions: Tammen S., "Gewalt in der Kunst des Mittelalters. Ikonographien, Wahrnehmungen, Ästhetisierungen", in: Herberichs C. – Braun M. (eds.), *Gewalt im Mittelalter* (Munich: 2005) 307–339.

created and conserved an aura that has clear parallels in the dignity of ecclesiastical power.²⁵ Thus the Signoria generated a sacred aura around itself almost as though it were a relic. In 1429 the Florentine Priori were propagandistically compared directly to the person of Christ.²⁶ The Florentine *Podestà* as an executive office of the highest council's body, together with the city judge, were described as 'Gods for people' by John of Viterbo as early as the thirteenth century. The notion of 'sacramentum' was also used in this context.²⁷ These aspects might be adapted in building our own model for the analysis of the less well documented history of Wrocław city council's self-representation.²⁸ But while the Florentine Palazzo della Signoria functioned only as an administrative quarter of the city council, the Town Hall of Wrocław, on the contrary, was a seat of the whole municipal power of jurisdiction and execution of the law; moreover, it also housed the treasury and armoury. Therefore, we have good reason to assume that the late Gothic decoration of Wrocław Town Hall, a building which symbolically incorporated the perfection and completion of secular power and in which the city's financial treasure was stored, was designed to hierarchically generate a sacral aura around civic authority by means of demonstrating the sanctity of material objects.²⁹

Before the southern wing of the building was rebuilt in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, one particular architectonic fragment may have played a crucial role within this demonstration. A tympanum from about 1380 with a relief of the *Vera Icon* accompanied by two separate sculptures of Mary and the Archangel Gabriel fits this context and was later,

²⁵ Meier U., "Die Sicht- und Hörbarkeit der Macht: der Florentiner Palazzo Vecchio im Spätmittelalter", in: Rau S. – Schwerhoff G. (eds.), *Zwischen Gotteshaus und Taverne. Öffentliche Räume in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Norm und Struktur 21 (Cologne: 2004) 229–271 (esp. 255).

²⁶ 'stetit Dominus in medio discipulorum suorum et dixit "pax vobis"', 'ita vos, Domini Priores...'; 'ut unus Deus est adorandus, sic vos Domini Priores venerandi estis ab omnibus civibus, et qui alios respiciunt, idola inducunt et sunt damnandi.' Meier, "Die Sicht- und Hörbarkeit" 258–259.

²⁷ Meier U., "Vom Mythos der Republik. Formen und Funktionen spätmittelalterlicher Rathausikonographie in Deutschland und Italien", in: Löther A. – Meier U. (eds.), *Mundus in imagine. Bildersprache und Lebenswelten im Mittelalter* (Munich: 1996) 345–387 (here: 351–352).

²⁸ Unfortunately, most of the sources concerning the building history of Wrocław Town Hall as well as its original functioning in the Middle Ages were lost in the Second World War.

²⁹ Up to now, the sacred motifs in the Town Hall's decoration were treated most of all as an addition to its thoroughly 'humanistic', i.e. secular program interpreted as an expression of the late-medieval burghers' growing self-confidence: Bukowski – Zlat, *Ratusz wrocławski*, passim; Zlat, *Rathaus zu Breslau*, i.a. 118–119.



Fig. 11. Unknown artist, *Vera icon held by the angels and Annunciation* (ca. 1380). Tympanum, partly destroyed, state before 1945. Wrocław, Museum of Architecture. Image © Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warsaw.

possibly in the sixteenth century, placed in the wall of one of the houses near the Town Hall (of which no detailed history is known) [Fig. 11].³⁰ This tympanum corresponds in scale and architectonic framing with the political tympanum, already mentioned, over the main entrance to the Town Hall's *praetorium*. This demonstration of the House of Luxembourg's political domination over the whole territory is still preserved *in situ* today. For that reason, as a working hypothesis, we may suppose that the tympanum with the *Vera Icon* and the adjoining Annunciation was originally located directly in the wall of the Town Hall. The motif of the Annunciation sculpted in 1480/90 on the newly built south-eastern corner of the building, discussed above, indicates that the adjoining earlier part of the municipal edifice was possibly the original place for the display of its fourteenth-century precedents together with the *Vera Icon* tympanum placed in a doorway. In this way, we can reconstruct the whole original ensemble as meant to connect the aspects of sacred allusion and political *esprit de corps*. The aura of municipal power could therefore have been ultimately demonstrated by the *vera effigies* of Christ, a motif of a gazing countenance of God, associated, as we know from the Church practices,

³⁰ Kaczmarek, *Rzeźba architektoniczna* 237–239.

with a huge potential of administrative control and spiritual government, expressed most of all in the management of indulgences.³¹ But the intriguing question we have to face is the following: why did the city's authorities, while rebuilding this part of the Town Hall, replace the powerful image of Christ's face on the cloth with the head of John the Baptist on a platter and thus combine another holy *caput* with the Annunciation of God's embodiment? Such a prominent exchange was surely not accompanied by any diminution in the value of the *Vera Icon* as an image of the most precious relic of that time. Was it just about the increasing value of the city's jurisdictional power? The political history of the city immediately prior to this change shed some light on these questions, as it includes an unparalleled and still underestimated municipal success on the stage of European power struggles.

Visualizing Political Success

The most significant moment in the secular career of the depictions of John's head in Wrocław came with the case of the conflict around the indulgence connected with the relic of this saint in the 1460s, a conflict that was accompanied by hidden intrigues and elaborate strategies of propaganda. This may well have been an initial stimulus for the gradual appropriation and reinterpretation of images that was to have long-lasting effects, as well as being a milestone in the growing self-confidence of the city's authorities. In 1460, for the feast day of the beheading of John the Baptist (29 August) and, in subsequent years, also for the main feast day of his nativity (24 June), the local authorities, by the help of papal legates, obtained a declaration of indulgence for those contributing to the city's own expenses.³² Such an arrangement was only made possible by the geopolitical circumstances, because the pope was anxious to conserve grants

³¹ On the meaning of the *Vera Icon* for the ecclesiastical politics and its function as a 'magnet for the audience': Egger Ch., "Papst Innocenz III. und die Veronica: Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Seelsorge", in Kessler H.L. – Wolf G. (eds.), *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*, Vila Spelman Colloquia 6 (Bologna: 1998) 181–203.

³² Lasłowski E., "Der Breslauer St. Johannes-Ablaß 1460–1471", *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Geschichte Schlesiens* 60 (1926) 18–51; cf. idem, "Die Breslauer und der Kreuzablaß gegen Georg Podiebrad von Böhmen, 1467–1470", *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Geschichte Schlesiens* 55 (1921) 93–109. Cf. Dola K., *Wrocławska kapituła katedralna w XV wieku. Ustrój – skład osobowy – działalność* (Lublin: 1983) 220–221. Cf. Paulus N., *Der Ablass im Mittelalter als Kulturfaktor* (Cologne: 1920) esp. 37–70 on secular purposes of indulgences; idem, *Geschichte des Ablasses im Mittelalter* (Paderborn: 1922–1923) vols I–III, passim.

of plenary indulgence for the purpose of raising funds for the anticipated anti-Ottoman crusade. But Wrocław city council sent several requests and endorsements to Rome in which it presented itself in this *causa* as the sole remaining faithful enemy of heresy still standing against the Bohemian revolutionaries, buttressing its claims with arguments for specific needs, such as the fortification of the cathedral isle against the Hussites. The pope agreed at first under the condition that the indulgence would be issued in the Wrocław cathedral and that the bulk of the money raised would serve to assemble the anti-Turkish crusaders' armada as well as to help in building the new Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. This is not the place to develop the whole course of this story and quote the efforts of the Wrocław city council at length. The accounts of corruption, secret ambassadors, and violent constraints amount to a virtual political thriller. Here it is sufficient to say that as a result of the city's patient diplomacy the papacy sanctioned the magistracy to retain for its own use the greatest share of the money donated on the feast day of John the Baptist for the full ten-year term of the indulgence. In 1471 the city even ventured an almost inconceivable request to the pope: a similar indulgence, but this time for a term of 50 years. Since the political circumstances in Eastern Europe had meanwhile altered in the pope's favour, this attempt remained fruitless. Nevertheless, it should be no surprise that it was just this long-drawn-out procedure of acquiring the indulgence that consequently provoked the stormy financial-political struggle in the local milieu between the municipal and episcopal administrations.

The indulgence proved wildly successful, and its fame soon transcended local borders. In 1471, soon after the period of the indulgence had ended, the city's new treasure chamber was built on the first floor of the south-eastern corner of Wrocław Town Hall.³³ Its exterior decoration may be treated as a visualisation of success [Fig. 12]. The figures on the façade show a certain iconographical gradation. St. Christopher, who seems to take the role of the city council itself, functions here as a first intermediary, since his figure was placed between the 'old time' of the basement with the notary's chamber inside and the 'new era' of the treasury situated on the first floor. The former is distinguished with two roughly decorated round arch windows à la Romanesque, while the two highly decorated Gothic windows of the latter distinctly recall the micro-architecture of precious reliquaries. They are separated by the full-length figure of the

³³ Zlat, *Rathaus zu Breslau* 23, 133, with references to the earlier literature.



Fig. 12. Façade of the treasury of the Wrocław Town Hall, detail (1471).
Image © M. Wisłocki.

second intermediary and city patron, John the Baptist. In the highest pediment there were also figures of the four patrons of the main parish churches of Wrocław, administered by patricians and burghers who had been granted the indulgence mentioned.³⁴ Hence, this composition visualizes the transition from the archaic era *sub lege* into the time of prosperity *sub gratia*, to quote the biblical terms. At the same time, it structurally shows the measurable profits for the city's sacred topography. In this way, the material state of the town's treasury was signalled with the help of the depiction of the saintly 'profit bringer' in just the place where the increasing wealth was stored, neighbouring the traditional courtroom. The path was now open for a large-scale appropriation of images: from now on, the image of John the Baptist's head was surely not only a depiction of a relic the city claimed, or of an adopted image of the only true justice. Above all, it was now the image of success. Therefore, it was most probably the defeat of the bishopric's authority in this long-lasting struggle that made it possible for the city council to exchange the pontifical rank of the *Vera Icon* in the Town Hall's oriel for the readily available agency of the local head relic, once the meaning of the latter had been remodelled according to the current political needs and benefits. Its display in the form of multiple publicly accessible images could be seen as an essential and constant guarantee of the expression of power. Let us again recall the Florentine case in this context: Richard Trexler has shown, drawing on Macchiavelli, that changes to the precedence and position of the Standard Bearer of Justice in the procession for the Florentine *mostra* on the feast day of St John the Baptist indicated changes in the power of the family whose representative had been entrusted with that role.³⁵ Similarly, the wholesale appropriation of the Wrocław episcopal relic's image by the municipal authorities, which could even be described as both a *translatio* (a transfer of relics to another place) and a *delatio* (taking them on tour for financial or political reasons),³⁶ was an act of visual violence on a radical scale.

³⁴ The original statues are lost, they were replaced with copies in 2006.

³⁵ Cf. Trexler R.C., *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca–London: 1991) 259–260, 274. For the characteristics of the Florentine feast of John the Baptist: Chrétien H.L., *The Festival of San Giovanni. Imagery and Political Power in Renaissance Florence* (New York: 1994).

³⁶ For *translatio*, *inventio*, *furta*, *adventus* and *delatio* as usual medieval procedures with relics see, among others: Geary P.O., *Furta Sacra. Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: 1991); Ugé K., "Relics as Tools of Power: The Eleventh-Century Inventio of St Bertin's Relics and the Assertion of Abbot Bovo's Authority", in Bijsterveld A.J.A. – Teunis H.B. – Wareham A. (eds.), *Negotiating Secular and Ecclesiastical Power. Western*

Excursus: The Coat of Arms and the Head Image as a Trophy

The municipal use in Wrocław of the saint's severed head, a visual synecdoche for the body, produced an emblem of the authority of the corporate body. While in Florence the allegorized biblical figure of Judith was introduced into the political struggle, in Wrocław it was the visual multiplication of a physical relic that took its place on the stage of public representation. The fact that the city council continuously used the same severed saintly head as the depiction on its official seal throughout the sixteenth century proves the administration's intention to present the veracity and authenticity of the fragment of the 'stolen body' as a means of attestation before the community. In Florence, the statue of Judith was taken from the expelled Medicis and raised before the Palazzo della Signoria as a monument of victory. The creation of a new significance for the sacred through its deprivation took place in a different way in Wrocław, as no change of rule took place. Instead of this, while the highest insignia of rule – the 'severed head' of the patron – still remained securely in the bishop's care, its authority was appropriated by images that had the power of public equivalents. It was, so to speak, an absolutely legalized *furta sacra* in broad daylight. The overpowering visual presence of the head image that was beneficently donated to the community in the Town Hall created a rival for the secret aura of the original relic that was exposed to the gaze of the people only on the feast day of the Nativity of John the Baptist on 24 June, when it was carried out of the cathedral treasury and shown to the faithful. Thus, although the relic itself was still distinguished by its alleged uniqueness, its authority was narrowed in the sense that it had been substituted by the perpetual and successful agency of the sculpted copies.

Having traced the political motivations underlying this intense image production, we can examine the obscure history of the city's coat of arms more carefully. The head of John on a platter, functioning in Wrocław as an emblem of the good justice of the court, can be characterized as a 'reversal image' that is able to invert the negative meaning of the beheading. The reference to John's death, interpreted typologically in the Middle

Europe in the Central Middle Ages. Selected Proceedings of the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds (Turnhout: 1999) 51–71 (here: 51). On the origins and meaning of *translatio* as a ceremony: Kühne H., *Ostensio reliquiarum. Untersuchungen über Entstehung, Ausbreitung, Gestalt und Funktion der Heiltumsweisungen im römisch-deutschen Regnum* (Berlin: 2000) 520–534.

Ages as his victory over the wicked King Herod, made it possible to transpose the image of the former's severed head to the allegory of *Justitia*, the attributes of which, as for example in Lorenzetti's frescoes in the Sienese Town Hall, could be limited to a disembodied head and the crown. Such a propagandistic inversion of the saint's biblical martyrdom as a sacrifice that brought victory over unethical injustice was further strengthened in Wrocław precisely through the medium of the coat of arms. The heraldry creates a 'jurisdictional body', especially where the real body in the sense of the living bearer of the heraldic genealogy is physically absent. In this way, the coat of arms confirms and authenticates the presence *in loco*. Walter Seitter has claimed that there was a strong interdependence between the coat of arms and the portrait as two media of the body; this thesis, on which Hans Belting has commented, opens up the prospect of an interesting theoretical argument.³⁷ The power of the significant presence was emblazoned in the centre of Wrocław's municipal corporate body's coat of arms, where the severed head of John the Baptist plays the role of the inescutcheon – regarded in heraldry as a point of honour dominating and elucidating the subordinated fields with ordinaries relating to territories placed underneath, also as a sign of assumption, a signal of claim in 'pretence'. So, divided by the political emblems of the territory, the city's coat of arms gains its rank with the help of a true portrait, a *vera effigies* simultaneously referring to the significant fragment of the real body – the *caput*. Therefore, in this way, the coat of arms gain additional significance from the head, while the head itself is modulated by its context on the coat of arms. Just like the *arma Christi* that sometimes

³⁷ Seitter W., "Das Wappen als Zweitkörper und Körperzeichen", in Kamper D. – Wulf Ch. (eds.), *Die Wiederkehr des Körpers* (Frankfurt a. M.: 1982) 299–312; Belting H., "Wappen und Porträt: zwei Medien des Körpers", in Büchsel M. – Schmidt P. (eds.), *Das Porträt vor der Erfindung des Porträts* (Mainz: 2003) 89–100, the latter also published in: Belting H., *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: 2001) 115–142 (Belting's considerations, incidentally, concern the case of individual, personal coats of arms). Cf. Heinrich W., "Das Wappen als öffentliches Zeichen", in Blaschitz G. – Hundsichler H. (eds.), *Symbole des Alltags – Alltag der Symbole. Festschrift für Harry Kühnel zum 65. Geburtstag* (Graz: 1992) 295–307; Biewer L., "Wappen als Träger von Kommunikation im Mittelalter: einige ausgewählte Beispiele", in Spieß K.-H. (ed.), *Medien der Kommunikation im Mittelalter*, Beiträge zur Kommunikationsgeschichte 15 (Wiesbaden: 2003) 139–154. For comparison, with regard to the strict regulations of Florentine heraldic imagery: Seiler P., "Kommunale Heraldik und die Visibilität politischer Ordnung: Beobachtungen zu einem wenig beachteten Phänomen der Stadtästhetik von Florenz, 1250–1400", in Stolleis M. – Wolff R. (eds.), *La bellezza della città. Stadtrecht und Stadtgestaltung im Italien des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Reihe der Villa Vigoni 16 (Tübingen: 2004) 205–240.

constitute Christ's fictive coat of arms as a sign of his victory,³⁸ in its new argumentative context it does not show agony, pain or defeat of the dead, but, instead, becomes a piece of identity, a successful trophy and a powerful sign of a greater triumph beyond temporal circumstances. The Wrocław shield of arms has been as a whole transformed into an image of recognition due to the bodily evidence of political success in this period of conflict. The images of the saint's severed head evolved into the officially acknowledged patents of political success and shaped the city's official face anew.

³⁸ Augustyn W., "Fingierte Wappen in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit. Bemerkungen zur Heraldik in den Bildkünsten", *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 3.F. 56 (2005) 41–82.

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THE SELF-PORTRAIT 'EN DÉCAPITÉ'
INTERPRETING ARTISTIC SELF-INSERTION

Arjan R. de Koomen

In this essay we leave the world of the cult of relics, the subject of many of the other contributions to this volume, and enter the realm of art to discuss images of severed heads in Renaissance and Baroque works of art that are known or believed to depict the artist himself. These self-portraits all appear in a story of decapitation in the guise of a victim of the sword. Erwin Panofsky, father to so many concepts of our discipline, has dubbed these appalling appearances 'self-portraits *en décapité*'. He did so in his discussion of a painting of Titian [Fig. 1] that shows Salome and John the Baptist (although others identify the subject as Judith and Holofernes).¹ He claims, on the basis of comparison to the later self-portraits of the artist, that Titian had projected his own features on to the head of the Baptist on the trencher.² The artist might have done so, Panofsky suggests, in order to express his love-stricken emotional state. What exactly might have afflicted the thirty-year old artist was beyond Panofsky's grasp, but to support the idea of amorous implications he treats the reader to what he calls the 'underground version' of the Salome-theme, where she is passionately in love with the Baptist and has him killed out of frustration, an eroticized re-telling without biblical foundation.

Panofsky takes Titian to be no isolated case and he goes on to name Cristofano Allori, who a century later portrayed himself in a similar way as Holofernes and depicted the girl with whom he had suffered an unhappy love story as Judith [Fig. 6], and also Caravaggio's *David* in the Borghese Collection, in which the artist portrayed himself in the guise of Goliath [Fig. 8]. In both cases a seventeenth-century text informs us about the self-portrayal; a historical foundation is lacking in Titian's case.

¹ Panofsky E., *Problems in Titian. Mostly Iconographic* (Princeton: 1970) 43. The proposal to identify the scene as a Judith and Holofernes comes from Joannnides P., "Titian's Judith and Its Context. The Iconography of decapitation", *Apollo* (1992) 163–170.

² The identification of the Baptist as Titian dates from the beginning of the twentieth century and was accepted by Foscari L., *Iconografia di Tiziano* (Venice: 1935) 22.



Fig. 1. Titian, *Salome (or Judith)* (ca. 1516). Oil on canvas, 90 × 72 cm. Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphili.

These three biblical stories of beheading – Salome and the Baptist, Judith and Holofernes, David and Goliath – enjoyed great popularity in the art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some of them, as Panofsky claims, might contain self-portraits. It is interesting to note that no such self-portraits have been perceived or recorded in painted martyrdoms of post-biblical decapitated saints or in decollation scenes from classical mythology. Even the story of Perseus and Medusa, well known as it was, never served as a stage for decapitated self-portraits. Obviously, Medusa was unsuitable, being a woman with ferocious teeth and snaky hair.³

A Short Historiography

The three examples of decapitated self-portraits are well known, but few art historians see them as belonging to a particular sub-genre, a category in its own right as implied by Panofsky's label 'self-portraits *en décapité*'. Nevertheless, this has found some scholarly support. In 1979, shortly after the term had been invented, John Shearman stated in an article on the Allori painting that 'this tradition of self-portraiture merits systematic study'.⁴ As an outline for this project he proposes more paintings for consideration. Besides the three works mentioned by Panofsky, he believes Lavinia Fontana and Artemisia Gentileschi to have rendered themselves as Judiths, while Palma Vecchio and Veronese cast themselves in the role of Holofernes.⁵ Shearman also includes Giorgione's *David* in Brunswick, now trimmed but originally including the chopped-off head of Goliath [Fig. 4]. He claims it was not the David, as is generally believed, but the Goliath

³ Cicero states in *Tusculanae disputationes* (I, 34) that Phidias depicted himself on the sculpted shield of Athena: 'opifices post mortem nobilitari volunt. quid enim Phidias sui similem speciem inclusit in cluqueo Minervae, cum inscribere (nomen) non liceret?' – 'Artists equally wish to be ennobled after death. What did Phidias mean when, not permitted to inscribe his name, he enclosed his likeness, in the shield of Minerva?'. This could be the first specimen of a decapitated self-portrait, although the text does not state explicitly that the sculptor depicted himself as Medusa. The claim, sometimes heard, that the Medusa shield of Caravaggio in the Uffizi portrays the painter himself is not tenable because of lack of likeness.

⁴ Shearman J., "Cristofano Allori's 'Judith'", *The Burlington Magazine* 121, 910 (1979) 3–10. He adds that in a systematic survey 'analogous and perhaps identical conceits of self-pity by poets would seem to have their place' (9).

⁵ He refers to the following depictions of Judith: Lavinia Fontana's in the Bargellini Collection, Bologna; Artemisia's in the Capodimonte Museum Naples; Veronese's in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna; and Palma's in the Uffizi.



Fig. 2. Giorgione da Castelfranco, *Judith* (ca. 1504). Oil on canvas, 144 × 66.5 cm.
St. Petersburg, Hermitage.

that bears Giorgione's features. He furthermore considers the bearded Holofernes in Giorgione's *Judith* to be Giorgione as well [Fig. 2].⁶

In 1991, Friedrich Polleross dedicated a section of a study on Old Testament identification portraits to disguised artists.⁷ Although many do not show decapitations, he contributed to the catalogue by suggesting that several other paintings of David with the head of Goliath might contain self-portraits. New candidates are works by the sixteenth-century Pordenone and the seventeenth-century Orazio Borgianni, Poussin, Vouet and Renier, all working in Rome soon after Caravaggio's death.⁸ Apart from the *Judiths* mentioned by Shearman, Polleross introduces some early sixteenth-century Venetian versions of the subject by Pordenone, Bartolomeo Veneto, Sebastiano del Piombo and Titian, although in none of these cases has the identification of the artist with Holofernes been substantiated.

In 1992, Shearman returned to the subject in his book *Only Connect* and added an important specimen to his collection by proposing that Donatello's bronze *David* contains a portrait of the artist in the guise of Goliath [Fig. 3], the only fifteenth-century example of a possible self-portrait *en décapité*.

These *capita selecta*, if accepted, hint at a larger phenomenon. Ten to fifteen examples are not enough to make the self-portrait *en décapité* a category in its own right, all the more so because most of them have been put forward without scholarly elaboration. Only five of them have been discussed in some detail: Donatello, Giorgione, Caravaggio, Allori, and Gentileschi. Yet, many more Holoferneses, Davids, and Baptists might show a likeness of the maker without it being recognized. In many cases, however, the identification of a portrait-like severed head is frustrated by the fact that the features of an artist are not reliably recorded. A systematic

⁶ A year earlier, Teresio Pignatti suggested at the symposium on the occasion of Giorgione's 500th birthday in Castelfranco in 1978 that the Holofernes of the *Judith* in the Hermitage could also be a self-portrait. Pignatti T., "La 'Giuditta' diversa di Giorgione", *Atti del convegno internazionale di studio per il 5° centenario della nascita*, 29–31 Maggio 1978 (Castelfranco Veneto: 1979) 269–271. He found proof in comparison with the *David* in Brunswick and the portrait woodcut in Vasari's *Vite*, although Hornig C., *Giorgiones Spätwerk* (Munich: 1987) 178, dismissed this possibility because of a lack of likeness.

⁷ Polleross F., "Typology and Psychology. The Role of the Identification Portrait in Updating Old Testament Representations", *Artibus et Historiae* 12, 24 (1991) 75–117, 105–111 (text) and 116–117 (notes).

⁸ The Pordenone is lost and only known through an engraving. Poussin's is in the Galleria Spada, Rome; Vouet's in Palazzo Bianco, Genoa; Renieri's in the Buriri Vici Collection, Rome.

comparison of painted, drawn and graphic physiognomies of artists with the hundreds of severed heads in art would probably yield more candidates. But no one, myself included, has undertaken this project. Thus this essay does not aim at expanding the catalogue, but rather at reducing it.

Apart from Panofsky's nomenclature and the rather cursory catalogues of Polleross and Shearman, the phenomenon as such has not been subject to closer study. Art historians have rather focused on the interpretation of specific decapitated self-portraits. This has produced literature of all sorts, and dubious investigation of the private life and ideas of the artist. But the general meaning of this peculiar type of self-representation has remained enigmatic. Older sources are hardly helpful. They seldom mention a self-portrayal; and if so, they do not explain the motive behind such a representation. For these authors the quest for meaning did not seem to be an issue, while it has become a major challenge for modern art historians. Especially in the last two decades the presumed interaction with the self, love, body, pain and death in these self-portraits proved intriguing. Study of the self-portrait *en décapité* has been dominated by such post-modern spheres of interest such as body images, self-fashioning, the grotesque, gender issues, self-mutilation, sadomasochism, and castration complexes, as well as rhetorical discourse, meta-art, the cult of the artist, social emancipation, and art-theoretical topics. However diverse these issues might be, all these modern interpretations share the conviction that the artist intended to express something essential about his or her self.

In this essay I want to address the problems of exegesis of this genre, and examine in more detail the five cases of decapitated self-portraiture most debated in art history. By summarizing the interpretations and commenting on their validity, I intend to distinguish between the likely and the unlikely and to define the self-portrait *en décapité* as an iconographical category more precisely.

Donatello's Bronze David

The earliest example is Donatello's bronze David [Fig. 3]. Commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici for the courtyard of the (old or new) Medici Palace, the sculpture is, to quote Janson, 'strangely androgynous' in its nudity and its effeminate forms.⁹ Such an anatomy was not prescribed by the biblical

⁹ Janson H.W., *Donatello* (Princeton: 1957) 85.



Fig. 3. Donatello, *David* (ca. 1435). Bronze, 165 cm. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

account. Several art historians believe this physical ambiguity derives from the homosexual inclination of the artist, which is hinted at in contemporary anecdotes about his contact with his *garzoni*. Janson characterizes David as a *le beau garçon sans merci*, an idol of the love of boys, to which Goliath alias Donatello is subjected. He reinforces this reading by recalling that certain humanistic circles – true adepts of the culture of ancient Greece – openly celebrated pederasty. Laurie Schneider has extended this interpretation in Freudian terms, suggesting that Donatello suffered from his homosexuality to the extent that he sublimated his castration complexes in an image of self-decapitation. This elicited a fierce debate on the applicability of retrospective psychoanalysis.¹⁰ Besides, the story of David and Goliath is not about male love. And it is not very likely that Donatello would express his alleged inclination toward sodomy in a statue displayed in the semi-public area of the Medici palace. Shearman was wise enough to realize that such an incongruity was unthinkable, and neutralizes Donatello's self-reference as an allusion to his willingness to be victim of virtue or to 'his eternal slavery to beauty'.¹¹ Yet, I am not convinced Goliath bears Donatello's features. We know little of Donatello's physiognomy beyond his wearing a beard (and even that has been questioned).¹² It is striking how many Goliath faces of the Quattrocento look alike, in sculpture as well as in painting.¹³ Therefore, it seems, Donatello's Goliath was rather a type-cast than a self-portrait. It is telling that Shearman's identification of Goliath as Donatello has been ignored in subsequent Donatello literature, while the homosexual readings of this statue have abounded since Janson's early explorations of sexual implications in 1957.¹⁴

¹⁰ Schneider L., "Donatello and Caravaggio. The Iconography of Decapitation", *American Imago* 33 (1976) 77–91; critical reaction by Dixon J.W., "The Drama of Donatello's David. Re-Examination of an 'Enigma'", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 93 (1979) 6–12; with a "Response" of Schneider included in the same issue (18–19). She replied again with "More on Donatello's Bronze 'David'", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 94 (1979) 48.

¹¹ Shearman J., *Only Connect... Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: 1992) 26.

¹² It is suggested by Cagliotti, *Donatello e i Medici. Storia del David e della Giuditta* (Florence: 2000) vol. I, 197, that Donatello (1386–1466) grew his beard only later in life. He based this assumption on the existence of a medal portraying, according to the inscription, the sculptor. It dates probably from his Paduan period (1440s) and shows a beardless and bald head in profile.

¹³ Think of the painted and sculpted Davids of Castagno, Verrocchio, Pollaiuolo, Ghirlandaio, Bertoldo and Bellano.

¹⁴ The only one who speaks explicitly about Shearman's interpretation is Cagliotti in his *Donatello e i Medici*, vol. I, 197. Yet, he dismisses 'con anima tranquilla' the idea that Donatello, then in his fifties, portrayed himself as Goliath. Remarkably, Adrian Randolph is completely silent about Shearman's identification (while referring to his *Only Connect*) in

Giorgione's David and Goliath

The identification of Giorgione with David in the picture in Brunswick seems less problematic, since Vasari reported it (between brackets) in his 1568 edition [Fig. 4].¹⁵ From his description we learn that the chopped-off head of Goliath was originally included. This is confirmed by the etching by Wencelaus Hollar of Giorgione's untrimmed painting from 1650, when it was in the collection of the Van Veerle brothers in Antwerp [Fig. 5]. Its caption states the identification and its source explicitly: 'vero ritratto di Giorgione di Castelfranco da luy fatto come lo celebra il libro del Vasari'. Encouraged by the historical testimonies of Vasari's statement and Hollar's visualisation, Giorgione's *David* has attracted several interpretations. This time there is no tendency to read the image in a homosexual key. The only information on the painter's inclination points in a very different direction. Vasari tells how the ardent love for a certain lady, infected by the plague, led to Giorgione's premature death in 1511. Besides, both the painter of the *Dresden Venus* in particular and the Venetian context more broadly are associated with feminine sensuality. This background contradicts a homo-erotic explanation of his *David and Goliath*.

Unravelling the meaning is complicated by the iconographical peculiarities of the painting. Self-portraits had not previously been produced in Venice and the subject of David with the head of Goliath requires a rather different attitude from the protagonist. In this technically damaged painting, David is cast in a dark cloudy atmosphere, seemingly unmoved by the recent triumph over Goliath. Most art historians read the facial expression of David as one of melancholy and scepticism that could be explained either by the presumed psychology of the biblical David or that of the Venetian artist. Cornelius Müller-Hofstede was the first to do so in 1957. He suggested that the melancholy hints at an artistic contemplation:

his extended examination of sexual issues in 'Homosocial Desire and Donatello's Bronze David', the main chapter of his book. Randolph A., *Engaging Symbols. Gender, Politics and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven/London: 2002) 139–192.

¹⁵ 'Bellissime teste a olio di sua mano nello studio Grimani patriarca d'Aquileia, una fatta per Davit (e, per quel che si dice, è il suo ritratto), con una zazzera, come si costumava in questi tempi, infino alle spalle, vivace e colorito che par di carne : ha un braccio ed il petto armato, col tiene la testa mozza di Golia.' In translation: 'One [head] represents David (and is said to be his own portrait) with long locks reaching to the shoulders, as they wore in these times, vivacious and painted as if it seems living flesh, there is armour on the breast and an arm with which he holds the severed head of Goliath', Vasari G., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence: 1885) vol. IV, 94.



Fig. 4. Giorgione da Castelfranco, *Self-portrait as David* (1500–1510). Oil on canvas, 52 × 43 cm (trimmed). Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum.



Fig. 5. Wencelaus Hollar, *True Portrait of Giorgione (Vero ritratto de Giorgione de Castel Franco)* (1650). Etching, 26 × 19.4 cm. London, British Museum.

Giorgione, as the younger and smaller *Alleinstehender*, conveying through David his feelings of overcoming the overpowering presence of Giovanni Bellini and his school.¹⁶ Jaynie Anderson similarly believes the artist to have been investigating the nature of his own melancholy in the context of artistic aggrandisement.¹⁷ She supposes that Giorgione presented a David troubled by 'Saul's envious persecution', when, after defeating Goliath, David's presence at Saul's court evoked the king's envy, ending in his insanity and suicide. The artist would have compared himself to this situation, now that he – in Anderson's words – might have been 'subject to his own melancholy and self-questioning at the time of the greatest triumph'.¹⁸ Although she wisely presents a biblical source for the psychological reading, it is hard to believe that this later episode can simultaneously be hinted at in a depiction of David displaying the head of Goliath, all the more because there is no iconographical *typus* of David's grief in response to Saul's madness. Altogether, the biblical reference remains hard to specify. In addition, Anderson suggests that the self-portrayal might testify of the moment that the painter enlarged his name from Giorgio to Giorgione. As she points out, it is quite remarkable that the David in the etching by Hollar is larger than the giant Goliath. However, it seems far-fetched that Giorgione, the genesis of whose nickname remains unknown, used the character of young David as the embodiment of his nominal enlargement.

Exegetical attempts of this stamp have been produced since Anderson's often cited contribution. In her 1998 book on the Renaissance self-portrait, Joanna Woods Marsden argues Giorgione worked upon the construction of a specific artistic identity, formulating the Venetian answer to Michelangelo's *David*, erected just a few years earlier. 'At the risk of over-interpretation', she says, 'the spectator, to whom Giorgione-as-David issues his challenge, might be seen a surrogate for Michelangelo as well as Saul. Such a Venetian-Florentine competition could also be understood as a very early statement of the opposition between Venetian *colore* and

¹⁶ Müller-Hofstede C., "Untersuchungen über Giorgiones Selbstbildnis in Braunschweig", *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 8,1 (1957) 13–34. 30. His article focuses on the Madonna-painting found with X-ray examination under the *David*, but he dedicates a page as well to *die ikonografische Frage* (30–31).

¹⁷ Anderson J., "The Giorgionesque Portrait. From Likeness to Allegory", in *Giorgione: Atti del convegno internazionale di studio per il quinto centenario della nascita*. Castelfranco 1978 (Castelfranco: 1979) 153–158.

¹⁸ Anderson, "The Giorgionesque Portrait" 154. She does not specify what this 'greatest triumph' might have been.

Florentine *disegno*'.¹⁹ In her view, Giorgione shows himself a head-hunter in order to challenge Michelangelo and the pre-eminence of Florentine art. To reply briefly, yes, this is indeed over-interpretation.

As mentioned earlier, Shearman opposes the identification of Giorgione as David and considers Vasari to be mistaken. He claims Giorgione chose Goliath for self-presentation. This fits better within the presumed tradition of decapitated self-portraits, and Goliath's head, Shearman feels, accords more with the physiognomy of a man of age thirty, as Giorgione was at the time. Also, he believes the bearded Holofernes in Giorgione's *Judith*, compositionally close to Donatello's David, to be the same man. However, the resemblance between the two is not altogether convincing. Shearman's theory is supported by the fact that portraits of the artist exist with a beard, but a recent examination of the history of Giorgione's iconography proves the beard to be a seventeenth-century invention.²⁰ A main objection to this identification is that it is hard to accept the Goliath with eyes closed as a portrait. Besides, it remains unsatisfactory that due to a lack of information concerning Giorgione's personality, this supposed masquerade goes unexplained. All together, there is too little evidence to follow Shearman in overruling Vasari's report. One argument to the contrary is the fact that around 1510 a young Pordenone (1483–1539) also made a self-portrait in the guise of David. In this case, the only witness to the lost painting is an engraving.²¹

Shearman has not been the only one to identify Goliath. Christian Hornig, a German Giorgione specialist, has suggested it could be a portrait of the artist's father and as such meant as a vengeful 'execution in effigy' for abandoning his illegitimate son.²² Given the absence of any indication

¹⁹ Woods-Marsden J., *Renaissance Self-Portraiture. The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist* (New Haven-London: 1998) 118–119.

²⁰ See the well-documented essay Pozzolo E.M. dal, "La barba di Giorgione", in Pozzolo E.M. dal – Puppi L. (eds.), *Giorgione. 12 dicembre 2009–11 aprile 2010* (Milan: 2009) 207–224, in the catalogue of the exhibition celebrating the 500th anniversary of his death in Castelfranco 2009–2010.

²¹ See Furlan C., *Pordenone* (Milan: 1988) 324, catalogued among the lost works. It was part of the famous collection of the Philippe Duc d'Orleans, but got lost when it was transferred to England around 1800. The engraving by N.F. Maviez after the painting (ibid. 324) was included in Couché J., *Galerie du Palais royal, gravée d'après les Tableaux des différentes Écoles*, 3 vols. (Paris: 1786–1808). In this publication it is explicitly stated that a folder with poems accompanied the canvas identifying the David as a self-portrait of the artist. For reproduction, see Furlan, *Pordenone* 324 and Polleross, "Typology and Psychology" 106, Fig. 28.

²² Hornig, *Giorgiones Spätwerk* 214. The idea was first brought up, as Hornig reports in his entry on the Brunswick *David*, by two students of Hamburg University participating

of a troubled relationship between father and son, this 'diagnosis' is rather fanciful.

Interpretations have so far not led to a better understanding of the painting. Most art historians read a message of melancholy in the facial expression of the Brunswick David. For an artist whom we imagine to be poetic and sensitive such a mood seems not too far-fetched. I am afraid, however, that *sfumato* and bad condition are being taken for temperament. One affected by melancholia would never put up their chin so proudly, nor fix their eyes on the beholder. Therefore, this face may be idiosyncratic, explained by the fact that it portrays the artist, but is ultimately not unfit for the victorious David.

Cristofano Allori's Judith and Holofernes

We know much more about the connection between the private life of the artist and the *Judith and Holofernes* by Cristofano Allori, now in the Pitti [Fig. 6].²³ Baldinucci informs us, about half a century after the painting was made, that the painter represented himself as Holofernes, that he grew a beard for the role, and that Judith is recognizable as the beautiful Maria Mazzafirri, with whom the painter had enjoyed a love affair with an unhappy ending. In addition, the maid Abra was said to counterfeit Maria's mother.²⁴ If Baldinucci's claims are true, Allori's self-reference seems to be painted straight from the injured heart. Here we might feel confident in explaining Allori's self-portrayal as self-expression. But still

in a Giorgione seminar in 1978–79. Hornig adds that he had approached a psychoanalyst from Munich University for literature on *Vaterhass* but that he had not received a helpful answer. He concludes the question of Giorgione's possible patricide with the consideration that a *tiefenpsychologische Deutung* might be hard to prove, but that it still elucidates the picture; and that the issue leaves plenty of possibilities for interdisciplinary research.

²³ Shearman, in his "Cristofano Allori's Judith", claims the version in the Royal Collection of the Queen of England to be the first and the one in the Pitti to have been painted later. Pizzorusso C., *Ricerche su Cristofano Allori* (Florence: 1982) 128–129 further developed the question of the different versions. He discerned at least four autograph versions and several old copies. We will not enter this discussion here, and will concentrate on the one in the Pitti. Most of the surviving drawings are related to this version.

²⁴ 'Ritrasse egli al vivo nella faccia di lei l'effigie della Mazzafira; tiene questa colla mano destra una spada sguainata; dipinse se stesso in quel quadro per Oloferne; la faccia d'una vecchia [...] dicesi, che fusse tolta al vivo della madre della medesima Mazzafira', Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, ed. F. Ranalli, P. Barocchi and A. Boschetto, 6 vols. (Florence: 1974) vol. III, 732–733.



Fig. 6. Cristofano Allori, *Judith* (1612–1616). Oil on canvas, 139 × 116 cm. Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina.

we have to be cautious. The fact that Cristofano made several nearly identical versions contradicts the idea that the painting was executed in a fit of lovelorn fury. All the more so, because two of them were commissioned, one for the grand duke of Tuscany and another for Cardinal Orsini. And what to think of the fact that we have life drawings of La Mazzafira and of her mother posing for Judith and Abra? This does not point to a painting rooted in pain over a lost romance.

Apart from Baldinucci's anecdotes, the painting had already won fame through the laudatory poems published by Ottavio Rinuccini and Giambattista Marino. The Florentine poet-librettist Rinuccini, famous for his contribution to the birth of opera at the Medici court, interprets it in conventional terms in his *Per la Iuditta del Sig. Cristofano Allori mandata a Roma* (c. 1616): Judith as metaphor of virtue triumphing over the infidel Holofernes.²⁵ However close he, as a fellow townsman, might have been to the painter, Rinuccini seems not to be aware of any autobiographical significance. The same goes for Marino, the poet from Naples then living in Paris. He included a poem on *Giudit con la testa d'Oloferne di Cristoforo Bronzino* in his famous series *La Galeria* from 1619.²⁶ His praise is cast in a Petrarchist conceit: Judith kills twice, with her sword as well as with her beauty. In both cases there are no allusions to Cristofano's self-portrayal. If these poets were aware of it, they did not think it belonged in their verses.

Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Paintings

Allori was friendly with the now most famous painter of Judith scenes who specialized in the depiction of the murder of Holofernes: Artemisia Gentileschi. As hardly needs retelling, in 1611, aged eighteen, she was raped by the painter Agostino Tassi, whom her father Orazio had invited to serve as her teacher. A sexual relationship developed, but the fact that

²⁵ 'Quando grava la man del teschio indigo / Trofeo più d' altro, e glories e raro, / Vibrando ardit il sanguines acciaio / Trae l'inclita Donna al patrio nido', Rinuccini O., *Poesie* (Florence, Giunti: 1622) 108.

²⁶ 'Di Betulia la bella / Vedovetta feroce / Non ha lingua nè voce, eppur favella;/ E par seco sì glori e voglia dire:/ Vedi s'io so ferire! / E di strale e do spada,/ Di due morti, felon, vo'che tu cada:/ Da me pria col bel viso,/ Poi con la forte man due volte ucciso!', *La Galeria del cavalier Marino* (Venice, Citti: 1620) 59. Concerning the change of name in the poem's title, Allori's father Alessandro had studied with Agnolo Bronzino; therefore both Alessandro and Cristofano were also known under the name of Bronzino.

Agostino ultimately refused to marry Artemisia led her father to charge Tassi with rape. The records of the lawsuit that followed provide an outstanding account of the events. Therefore, it is hard to view these paintings in a de-personalized way. For example, from her testimony in court we know that after the assault Artemisia had threatened Tassi with a knife she took from a drawer with the words 'I'll kill you with this knife because you have violated me'.²⁷ Her bloodthirsty renderings of the killing of Holofernes are often understood as her revenge, especially because her physiognomy is recognized in Judith.²⁸ This idea has been amplified by Freudian and feminist readings, which made her paintings into a 'symbolical castration' not only of the inflictor but also of the male dominance which characterized her world.²⁹

Such a personalized explanation is complicated by the historical circumstances. All the Judith paintings she made were commissioned [Fig. 7].³⁰ This could hardly be because grand dukes and cardinals were sympathetic to Artemisia's efforts to overcome the trauma of rape. They simply appreciated the paintings as art. Moreover, her father Orazio also specialized in Judith scenes and used his daughter as a model, before and after 1611. Clearly he was not referring to his daughter's violent experience, because he chose her to model in other situations as well. The same applies to Artemisia herself: she used her own physiognomy for many other roles besides that of Judith.

This is not to say Artemisia cannot have had recollections of Tassi while working on Holofernes, but it was not the motive behind the production

²⁷ For the translated testimony of the Rape Trial of 1611, see Garrard M., *Artemisia Gentileschi. The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: 1989). Appendix B: 403–487, citation 416.

²⁸ Bissell R.W., "Artemisia Gentileschi – A New Documented Chronology", *Art Bulletin* 50 (1968) 156, even asks rhetorically: 'one may wonder whether she, consciously or unconsciously, did not cast Agostino Tassi in the role of Holofernes!'.

²⁹ The most extensive feminist examination of these paintings is found in Garrard's monumental monograph *Artemisia Gentileschi* 278–336, in the long chapter on the Judith paintings, and, more generally, in her chapter 'Historical Feminism and Female Iconography', 141–182. Many contributions of this kind have since appeared. Ten years later Bissell published a more conventional monograph with a catalogue raisonné. In the chapter 'Myths, Misunderstandings and Musings' he refutes some of the Freudian and feminist analyses that cannot hold up to historical evidence or tradition. Bissell R.W., *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art* (University Park: 1999) 103–134. Somewhere between these views moves Uppenkamp B., *Ein Kapitel für sich. Die Judithbilder Artemisia Gentileschis* (Berlin: 2004) 159–183.

³⁰ Her Judith paintings are kept in the following collections: Museo Capodimonte, Naples 1612–13; Palazzo Pitti, Florence 1613–14; Uffizi, Florence c. 1620; Detroit Institute of Art, c. 1625.



Fig. 7. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Holofernes* (1612). Oil on canvas, 159 × 126 cm. Naples, Museo di Capodimonte.

of the Judith-paintings. Her personal experience, or 'castration wish' as it has been called, is not necessarily the explication for the bloodiness of her paintings.

Caravaggio's David and Goliath

The shedding of blood is also manifest in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* [Fig. 8], certainly the most famous and most debated severed-head self-portrait.³¹ Gianpietro Bellori states in his biography of Caravaggio, written around 1645 but not published before 1672 that Goliath 'è il suo proprio ritratto'.³² He is silent, however, on the identity of the boy in the role of David. In Giacomo Manilli's guidebook to the Borghese collection from 1650 he is also identified: Caravaggio painted himself as Goliath and David as his 'Caravaggino'.³³ It is puzzling who is meant by Caravaggino. Some say it was a nickname for a lover boy, enhancing the homosexual content of this painting.³⁴ More likely it refers to a younger fellow townsman, such as the painter Cecco di Caravaggio who used to pose for him.³⁵

These early sources date from the middle of the century, about forty years after the painting was completed. Bellori reports it was made for Cardinal Scipione Borghese, who was so pleased with it that he introduced Caravaggio to his uncle Paul V, whose portrait he subsequently painted. If correct, this means it must have been painted between May 1605, when the Borghese pope was installed, and May 1606, the moment Caravaggio fled from Rome after killing Ranuccio Tomassoni. Many art historians prefer,

³¹ For a recent selected list of interpretations, see the entry in the exhibition catalogue: Cassani S. – Sapiro M. – Weir M., *Caravaggio. The Final Years* (London: 2005) 137–138.

³² Published in Bellori's *Le Vite de' Pittori Scultori e Architetti Moderni* of 1672; for the Italian version and English translation, see Hibbard H., *Caravaggio* (London: 1983) 367. The earlier biographers Baglione (written around 1625, published in 1642) and Scanelli (published 1657) do not mention the painting.

³³ 'in quella testa volle ritrarre se stesso, e nel David ritrasse il suo Caravaggino', Manilli G., *Villa Borghese fuori di Porta Pinciana descritta* (Rome, Lodovico Grignani: 1650) 67. It can also be that the author was just mistaken, because there had been a seventeenth-century painter nicknamed Caravaggino: Tommaso Tonnini (1601–1637), who was, however, too young to have known Caravaggio, but dead for a while when Manilli wrote his famous line.

³⁴ This is what Avigdor Posëq states in his "Caravaggio's Self-Portrait as the Beheaded Goliath", *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 59 (1990) 171.

³⁵ For an analysis of the relationship between the two painters from the Lombardian town of Caravaggio, which possibly comprised a sexual component, see Papi G., *Cecco del Caravaggio* (Soncino: 2001) especially 14–15.



Fig. 8. Caravaggio, *David* (1609). Oil on canvas, 125 × 101 cm. Rome, Galleria Borghese.

however, a dating in the last year of the painter's life, and suppose it was among the group of three paintings he intended to send to Cardinal Scipione Borghese from Naples. Caravaggio stayed there in 1609–1610 awaiting the remittance of the sentence for the murder in 1606. The intended gift might have been prompted by the hope that the cardinal would plead his case with his uncle, so that Caravaggio could return to Rome. However, clemency arrived before the gifts and Caravaggio died on his way to Rome with these paintings. There is no evidence that the *David and Goliath* was among the group, but many art historians believe so because the self-portrait fits so well in the process of absolution. An explanation often heard goes that he painted himself in the guise of Goliath in order to admit he was a sinner deserving the death penalty, hoping this self-punishment in painting would elicit papal clemency. Some art historians argue that David counts as a prototype of Christ, of whose earthly *locum tenens* was the pope.³⁶ *Ben trovato*, but I take the reading of a semi-nude caravaggesque as a personification of the Holy Father to be too farfetched. We can also question the choice of Goliath, dead as he is, as the most effective candidate for soliciting a pardon. A scene of remorse, penitence, or reconciliation, not hard to find in the Bible, would have been more appropriate than David and Goliath. Thus the autobiographical value of this self-portrait and the relevance of his crime, sentence and remittance seem overstated.

Homosexual implications and psychoanalytical approaches entered Caravaggio studies in the 1970s.³⁷ Admittedly, there is hardly an artist more inviting to such an approach. Herwardt Röttgen, in 1973, was the first to examine *David and Goliath* with the help of Freud.³⁸ He took Caravaggio's self-portrait as a manifestation of his sadomasochistic tendencies. From Freud and Wilhelm Reich, Röttgen had understood that aggression transforms into self-destruction, that it substitutes punishment feared

³⁶ This explanation was first brought forward by Calvesi M., "Caravaggio o la ricerca della salvezza", *Storia dell'arte* 9/10 (1971) 93–142; and has been repeated numerous times. For a recent elaboration of this theory see Treffers B., *Caravaggio. Die Bekehrung des Künstlers* (Amsterdam: 2002).

³⁷ This line of interpretation goes back to Frommel L.F., "Caravaggio und seine Modelle", *Castrum Peregrini* 96 (1971) 21–56 and Posner D., "Caravaggio's Homo-Erotic Early Works", *Art Quarterly* 34 (1971) 310–324. Hibbard propagated the idea among a wider audience with his *Caravaggio* (1983), especially in his chapter 'Afterthoughts' (256–267).

³⁸ Röttgen H., *Il Caravaggio. Ricerche e interpretazioni* (Rome: 1974) especially the chapter 'Riflessioni sul rapporto tra la personalità del Caravaggio e la sua opera', 147.

in reality. The specific choice of decapitation as a sublimation of self-destruction is explained as a castration anxiety, which derives from an Oedipus complex. Castration anxiety is a Freudian classic. It is amazing how many authors, despite modern scepticism toward Freud, treat this notion as obvious: decapitation as a stand in for castration. Conversely, I cannot understand why an act as absolute and comprehensive as decapitation should symbolize something else and in particular should denote something so specific? I traced the idea to its origins and arrived, of course, at Freud's posthumous text on *Das Medusahaupt* and his 1909 analysis of *Kleiner Hans*.³⁹ Although it might be familiar, I think it merits re-telling in order to show the casual foundation of the castration theory.

Freud, Castration and Medusa

At the age of three Hans developed a fear of horses, which manifested itself during walks in the park. He was afraid they would bite him, and he said he was especially scared by the dark area around the horse's mouth. Freud combined this with Hans's curiosity about his sexual organ and its absence in his younger sister. Significantly, Freud discovered from the diary of Hans's father that his mother had once warned him his *Wiwimacher* [*sic*] would be cut off if he did not stop touching it. It gave Freud sufficient clues for a diagnosis. Hans was in the phallic phase when consciousness of anatomical sexual differences arise and a boy fears the possibility of losing his sexual organ. The biting horse, therefore, stood for his castration anxieties. The dark area around the horse's mouth referred to his father's moustache, an indication that Hans suffered from an Oedipus complex.

³⁹ Freud's extensive *Analyse der Phobie eines fünfjährigen Knaben*, the report of the treatment of Kleiner Hans (whose real name was Herbert) in 1905–06, was published as the first issue of the *Jahrbuch für Pathologische und Psychoanalytische Forschung* 1 (1909), re-published in Freud S. – Freud A., *Gesammelte Werke*, 18 vols. (London: 1940–1952) vol. VII, 241–332. After re-encountering his former patient in 1922 as a young man of 19, Freud dedicated a short *postscriptum* to the case in 1922: 'Nachschrift zur Analyse des kleinen Hans' Freud S. – Freud A., *Gesammelte Werke* (London: 1940–1952) vol. XIII, 431. He ascertains that Hans, who turned out to be a balanced person, had not been harmed by the treatment at such a young age (for which Freud had been criticized). Interestingly, the meeting with the former Kleiner Hans took place in the same year as the text on the *Medusahaupt* was written.

Freud believed these conclusions to be universal, for all cultures and all times. He therefore looked for symbolic manifestation of castration complexes and arrived at the myth of Medusa. In his text (which does not mention Caravaggio's *Medusa Shield*), published posthumously but written in 1922, he literally puts an equal sign: to decapitate = to castrate.⁴⁰ His explanation is that the 'Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals [...] and when a boy, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother, he becomes terrified to be castrated'. At the same time Freud believes the snaky hair to be phallic, which 'is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration'. A rule, I must say, hardly to be taken as technical. Freud brings on more of these phallic paradoxes, which result rather in incantation than explanation.

Hence, the inquiry into Freud does not help us understand the thesis that decapitation denotes castration. It rather leaves us wondering how the killing of a monster representing the female genitalia can become a symbol of castration of the male organ. Freud's train of thought seems too arbitrary and associative to be called a theory. Yet the notion that decapitation equals castration seems to be universally accepted. This might be because the elaborations of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva have halloed the idea with new layers of interpretation and intellectualisation, enriching Freud's originally weak argumentation. In 1998 Kristeva was invited by Françoise Viatte to present her ideas on decapitation and castration (and many issues she considers to be related to it) in an exhibition at the print room of the Louvre.⁴¹ Her anthology, entitled *Visions capitales*, of Medusian *monstres vulvaires* in such an established institution certainly helped to spread the notion of equation. Anyhow, I doubt we can take the link between Kleiner Hans and Big Goliath seriously. It seems wiser to reject the very notion of castration complexes as the unconscious motive for the depiction of decapitation.

⁴⁰ Freud S., "Das Medusenhaupt", *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und Imago* 25 (1940) 105–106. Translated into English in Freud S., "The Head Of Medusa", *Psychoanalytical Quarterly* 11 (1940) 266–267.

⁴¹ Kristeva J., *Visions Capitales* (Paris: 1998) exhibition catalogue Département des Arts graphiques, Musée du Louvre. Since she made a selection from the contents of the Louvre print room, the exhibition does not include any of the works of art under discussion in this essay.

Agostino Carracci's Judith

A premise for this reading of Caravaggio's image and all the other interpretations we have discussed so far, is the idea that the artist consciously or unconsciously selected a scene of decapitation on which to project his or her self-image in order to express an aspect of the self. I want to bring to mind a well-documented portrait version of Judith and Holofernes that puts the role play in a different light: a painting by Agostino Carracci, made around 1593, showing protagonists with individual features [Fig. 9].⁴² Thanks to the oration pronounced at the funeral of Carracci in 1602, we know that the painting must have been commissioned by the university professor Melchiorre Zoppio (1554–1634) on the occasion of the death of his wife, whose name was Olimpia Luni. A moving sign of devotion, yet resulting in an iconographical incongruity: presenting the deceased wife as the surviving Judith and himself, being alive, as the dead Holofernes. What is the message here? That Zoppio was fatally seduced by his own wife? That he had suffered under her mercilessness? Since we are well informed about Zoppio, we know it was nothing of the sort. He had written laudatory poems in memory of Olimpia. In one of them he praises *Luna* (pun on her surname) as his *Sole*, a trope Agostino translated into paint by adorning Judith's dress with little moons and suns. These ornaments of devotion have nothing to do with the story of Judith.

The choice of story might seem to be born out of iconographical ignorance. Yet, Zoppio was a professor of ethics at the University of Bologna and founder of the *Accademia dei Gelati* in Bologna. He was a cultured man, noted for his erudition in the arts and sciences, who must have been capable of understanding the simple implications of a role play.⁴³ Therefore,

⁴² The painting was first presented and identified as Zoppio and his deceased wife at the exhibition: Feigenbaum G. e.a., *Around 1610. The Onset of the Baroque. An Exhibition in Aid of R.E.S.T., the Relief Society of Tigray, 14th June to 16th August 1985* (London: 1985) cat. nr. 4. Soon afterwards it was included in the exhibition: Smyth F.P. – O'Neill J.P., *The Age of Correggio and the Carracci. Emilian Painting of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century* (Washington: 1986) 258. In the entry Dante Bernini is somewhat sceptical about the interpretation of Anderson and concludes that 'the problem of the identification must remain open for the time being'.

⁴³ In the obituary by Lucio Faberio, held at the funeral of Agostino Carracci in 1602 and included in Malvasia's *vita* of the artist of 1678, a sonnet by Zoppio in praise of the portrait of his deceased wife is included. Zoppio does not refer to the Judith theme. He simply plays with the concept of her speechlessness (*realiter* and in the painting) and states that the eyes of the lover function as its replacement. See for an English translation



Fig. 9. Agostino Carracci, *Judith* (ca. 1593). Oil on canvas, 122 × 88 cm. Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

I can only come to the conclusion he did not care about the incongruities, and that he did not see the masquerade as an identification with all the characters of the biblical narrative. This was confined, I believe, to the presentation of his wife, for which the story provided a scene for staging a strong woman. Yet, it seems Zoppio was indifferent about the implications of his own Holofernian role.

Re-shaping the History of the Self-portrait en décapité

With this in mind we can return to the self-portraits. In my view, no convincing interpretation has been produced for any of the five cases we have examined. This might be taken as an incentive to search further for biographical, (con)textual, and pictorial keys to decipher these works. Yet, the fact that the collective efforts of so many art historians have yielded so little may also point to the fact that we have been asking the wrong questions. As Zoppio's case shows we should not expect these role plays to be meaningful in the sense that artists should wish to communicate something essential about themselves, intellectually or emotionally, through heads wearing their physiognomy. That is to say, they did not necessarily identify with the decapitated characters.

Interestingly, only in the case of the Caravaggio can we convincingly be said to be looking at a deliberate self-portrait, although the other seventeenth-century paintings by Allori and Gentileschi provide likely candidates. Since violent scenes had become the trademark of the Caravaggist generation, their self-portrayal *en décapité* might be seen as a – serious or playful – involvement in their own art. On the other hand, the earlier examples, Donatello and Giorgione, provide too little evidence to convince us of the painters' portrayal as Goliath. On the other hand, in Giorgione's case we can be positive about his posing for David, although we have no basis on which to explain his motives for doing so.

The recorded and convincing seventeenth-century examples stimulated Panofsky and Shearman to look for an earlier tradition. They proposed many sixteenth-century candidates, but the project they called for has not been substantiated by a catalogue of convincing identifications and by a better understanding of the motives behind the role play. I suspect therefore

of the oration and Zoppio's sonnet: Summerscale A., *Malvasia's Life of the Carracci. Commentary and Translation*, (University Park: 2000) 204–205.

that this tradition might not have existed before Caravaggio, that all the earlier examples are nothing more than the product of scholarly speculation.⁴⁴ Still, the root of the decapitated self-portraits lies in the Cinquecento. It might very well be that Giorgione's prototype prompted Caravaggio to reverse the role play and act as Goliath instead of David as his predecessor had chosen to. Contemporaries have remarked several times that Caravaggio revived Giorgione's art of colouring.⁴⁵ Therefore, emulating the Venetian master in his own *satirico* way (to speak with his biographer Baglione) is far from unlikely. If so, it is Vasari's parenthetical remark that stimulated Caravaggio to become the inventor of the self-portrait *en décapité*.

Postscript: Self-expression or Poetical Seduction

This still leaves us with the question of the meaning of the motif. As the fifteenth-century saying goes, *ogni pittore dipinge se*.⁴⁶ This implies automimesis at work as an unconscious artistic act. This might be a partial explanation for the phenomenon. However, the rendering of decapitated heads required a specific attention in which the resemblance between portrait and painter could not have gone unnoticed. A more likely explanation is that self-portrayal is the result of the artist's deliberate search for convincing illusions. For the representation of a gruesome head, the artist's own physiognomy was a helpful tool, because it can be tried out in the mirror and studied in depth. There is the famous story of Bernini who used the mirror to arrive at a convincing physiognomy for the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence.⁴⁷ Therefore, the artist's face is that of a model and not a portrait. This means the resemblance is not the result of introspection, but of looking out.

⁴⁴ I am grateful to Jeroen Stumpel from Utrecht University for suggesting this possibility while discussing the topic of the self-portrait *en décapité*.

⁴⁵ On the Giorgionesque issue see Hibbard, *Caravaggio* 86–87.

⁴⁶ For the fifteenth-century history see Zöllner F., "'Ogni pittore dipinge se'. Leonardo da Vinci and 'automimesis'", in Winner M. (ed.), *Der Künstler über sich in seinem Werk. Internationales Symposium der Bibliotheca Hertziana Rom 1989* (Weinheim: 1992) 137–160.

⁴⁷ *Lawrence on the grill*, 1614, Contini Bonacossi Collection on loan to the Uffizi, Florence. Also for the *Anima dannata* in the Palazzo di Spagna in Rome and the *Borghese David* Bernini is said to have studied his own face for the proper rendering of passions in his sculptures.

However, to reduce the phenomenon to the practicality of self-modelling may sound too un-imaginative, ignoring the lure of poetic play so typical of Renaissance and Baroque culture. Indeed, there is more at stake. First of all, I do not want to deny that artists may have had associations of a private nature when they 'modelled' for decapitation scenes. And these could be painful, as in the case of Cristofano and Artemisia, but once again, I do not believe that pain prompted them to portray themselves in this way. In most cases artists felt – I think – no compassion with the victims they offered their countenance to. On the contrary, posing for a decapitated head may even have had an exciting or jocular effect, not unlike the enjoyment of telling a ghost story or making a horror movie. The presentation of the artist's chopped-off head might even have evoked amusement in the artist, his friends and admirers. The comic effect consists in providing an absurdity between the possible and the impossible: a living artist killing himself in his art.

Another aspect of playfulness has to be considered here as well. I refer to the as-if character of play and to the absorptive force of fiction. Creating fiction or illusion (and the painting of a decapitation scene is obviously just that) can evoke the curiosity of the artist to sense the 'reality' of the illusion, or, to root the concept of this seduction more deeply, to 'experience' the magical power of the poetical act. The artist's involvement reminds us of directors like Hitchcock or Fellini who appeared in their own movies. An even closer analogy is provided by the French author Michel Houellebecq who describes, in *La carte et le territoire* (2010), the murder of a writer carrying his own name. In film analysis this is called a cameo appearance; in the discussion of literature the term self-insertion is used. In both cases, it is not, I believe, that these authors or directors appear with the intention to convey essentials about themselves, but rather because they want to taste their own feigned reality. The participative impetus equally depends on the absorptive power of the illusion depicted as well as on the self-consciousness of the act of making it. Therefore, not all scenes are as inviting, nor do all artists feel invited. It is not hard to understand that the depiction of decapitation is, despite its abhorrence, especially alluring. Fiction is here overwhelmingly more powerful and audacious than anything from the reality of its creator's life. Thus if an artist feels solicited to undergo the represented martyrdom himself, he does not do so in order to punish himself, but rather to celebrate his artistry. In this way, the self-imaging *en décapité* can be explained as a token of professional pride which implicitly or explicitly functions as a signature. In Caravaggio's case his personality might have stimulated his decision to, so to say, cut off his head, but

its significance lies more in his art: enhancing and glorifying the violent 'hyper-naturalism' he was capable of staging in paint.

With these considerations in mind we have moved away from the interpretations that regard personal feelings and convictions as the driving force for presenting oneself as a severed head. This masquerade is not, I think, one that artists adopted in order to express something about themselves. They were not getting under someone's skin to tell deep secrets. Self-expression was not required from them. The marginalizing of the artist's 'self' may come as a surprise. Stephen Greenblatt has taught us that the 'self' was a Renaissance invention. And his concept of self-fashioning has prompted many to piece together the construction of artistic identities. Decapitated self-portraits seemed ideal working material, but as this essay underlines, the scholarship devoted to this theme has not helped us to learn more about the artist's self.

The artist's self is, generally speaking, a prerequisite of modern art. With the phenomenon of the self-portrait *en décapité* we have been confronted with the question of whether the early modern period must be seen as the first manifestation of it. As I have argued, I do not think so; artists were not involved with the issue of self or identity. They were obsessed with making art and with the power of art. To illustrate this notion and the essential difference between decapitated self-portraits from the early modern and the post-modern world, I want to conclude with Marc Quinn's *Self*, a head cast from his own blood, which is displayed frozen to keep in shape [Fig. 10]. In contrast, the decapitated artist-physiognomies discussed in this essay cannot be labelled 'self'; neither was their working material, to put it metaphorically, their own blood.

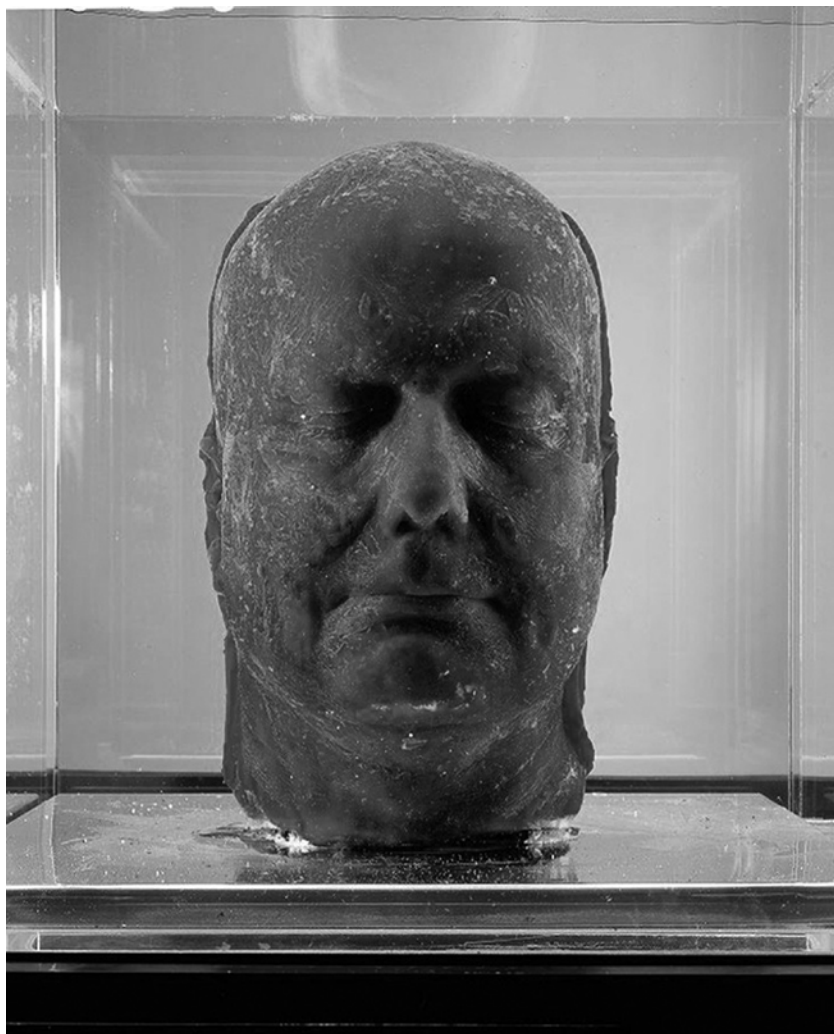


Fig. 10. Marc Quinn, *Self* (1991). Frozen blood of the artist, life size. London, Saatchi Gallery (project repeated every five years, 2006 edition purchased in 2009 by the National Portrait Gallery, London).

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CAPITA SELECTA IN *HISTORIA SACRA*.
HEAD RELICS IN COUNTER REFORMATION ROME (CA. 1570–CA. 1630)

Jetze Touber

In 1971 the Jesuit Baudouin de Gaiffier (1897–1985) expressed his perplexity at the fact that early Christian martyrs were often decapitated in an almost casual manner, after miraculously having survived the most extreme attacks, such as mutilation, drowning, ferocious beasts or the stake.¹ Neither the martyrs themselves nor the judges seemed to expect anything else than that the sword would sever their heads from their trunks, even though God had preserved the victims from harm during all preceding attempts at mutilation. De Gaiffier was a member of the *Société des Bollandistes* and as such he partook in a tradition of critical research into hagiography that went back three and a half centuries. Even though since the days of Hippolyte Delehaye (1859–1941) the *Bollandistes* had enthusiastically embraced the study of the *literary* aspects of hagiography, De Gaiffier still racked his brains over the *historical* worth of hagiographic accounts.² The cursory manner in which decapitations ended martyrs' lives after they had endured the most destructive violence imaginable without so much as a scratch, defied logic and puzzled the serious historian of hagiography.

In studying hagiography as a source of factual historical content, De Gaiffier was a worthy heir to the *Bollandiste* enterprise that had its roots in the seventeenth century with Héribert Rosweyde (1569–1629), Jean Bolland (1596–1665) and Godefroid Henschen (1601–1681). These Belgian Jesuits had set as their target to collect and publish all documents containing information about the biographies and the cults of the saints, and use them to establish the definite historical truth about the saints' lives and the events related to them after their venerable deaths.³ They took the

¹ De Gaiffier B., "Le glaive dans les passions des martyrs", in De Gaiffier B. (eds.), *Recherches d'hagiographie latine* (Brussels: 1971) 70–76.

² Delehaye H., *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires* (Brussels: 1921, 1966²).

³ Sawilla J.M., *Antiquarianismus, Hagiographie und Historie im 17. Jahrhundert. Zum Werk der Bollandisten. Ein wissenschaftshistorischer Versuch* (Tübingen: 2009).

lead in a European movement to rewrite regional, local or corporate hagiographies in the wake of tightened regulation of saints' worship imposed by the central administration of the Catholic Church.⁴ This was a direct consequence of the turmoil of the confessional conflicts of the Reformation Era that forced the Catholic Church to refound many of her age-old traditions. Since the veneration of martyrs and confessors was one of the more contested traditions, hagiography had to be scrutinized for its documentary value in validating the Church's claims. Such claims included the miracles worked by confessors and the heroic suffering endured by martyrs in the name of faith. The beheadings recounted in innumerable martyrological narratives thus became verifiable, historical claims.

Nevertheless, in stark contrast with their twentieth-century successors, the first *Bollandistes* did not question the credibility of the events occurring in saints' lives *per se*. One might have expected a critical evaluation of the wondrous healings, ecstasies, prophecies and of course the improbable orgies of violence perpetrated against martyrs, followed by a quick decapitation that filled the *vitae*, *passiones*, *legendae* and other subgenres of the hagiographical biography. This was not, however, what happened. Instead, hagiography was evaluated on account of the authority of its documentary base. The older and more trustworthy the testimony, the likelier it seemed that the story of sanctity – or martyrdom – was genuine. With a sufficiently authoritative testimonial, any narrative, however stylized or embellished it might seem, would be accepted as historical fact.

The same focus on written documentation obtained in the identification of objects venerated as holy relics. Consequently, the alleged cut off heads of martyrs would be accepted as legitimate relics, provided that they were properly certified by valid textual documentation. Initially therefore, the actual external appearance and characteristics of these heads was not very relevant. In this article we survey some events connected to severed heads in Counter-Reformation Rome, in the period roughly from 1570 to 1630. In these decades the predecessors of the *Bollandistes*, members of both the Jesuit and Oratorian orders, took stock of which relics were venerated under whose name, in Rome as much as in the rest of the Catholic world. We will see that as the inventory of relics in this period became more complete and articulated, the occurrence of conflicting data did require

⁴ Ditchfield S., *Liturgy, Sanctity and History in Tridentine Italy*. Pietro Maria Campi and the Preservation of the Particular (Cambridge: 1995) 10–12.

the clergy to pay closer attention to the physical quality of relics, after all. As heads of martyrs and confessors were observed, details were noted that either supported or problematized the historical claims for which the Counter-Reformation church required satisfactory proof. In particular, the claims on the part of several ecclesiastical institutions to possess the head of one and the same martyr invited close scrutiny – maybe more so than other bodily parts, as the head had distinctive features that served as indications of, for instance, his or her age, that could be checked with the hagiographical documentation.

Venerated Heads in Counter-Reformation Rome

The sites where the mortal remains of martyrs were buried from late Antiquity onward came to constitute focal points of devotion that developed into oratories and churches dedicated to the memory of these martyrs. As early as 401 the Council of Carthage explicitly demanded that the altars of such *martyria* or *memoriae* contain material relics of the martyrs venerated, reflecting at the same time the importance that the clergy attached to the actual physical object as a link between the sacred and the secular, and the widely felt need for commemorative altars even where no martyr was buried at all.⁵ As the persecutions of Christians ceased, occasions for becoming a martyr of the faith became exceedingly rare. The continued demand for fresh saints heralded the age of the holy confessors, venerated for their virtuous lives rather than for their violent deaths.⁶ Their mortal remains became as sought after as those of their murdered brethren. From the eighth and ninth centuries onwards, it became common practice in the Christian West to include fragments of the bodies of saints inside every consecrated altar.⁷ Churches, monasteries and convents did not limit themselves to the relics of the saints they were dedicated to, they avidly accumulated bits and pieces of as many saints as they could.

⁵ Canetti L., *Frammenti di eternità. Corpi e reliquie tra Antichità e Medioevo* (Rome: 2002) 81–94; Scorza Barcellona F., “Le origini”, in: Benvenuti A. e.a. (eds.), *Storia della santità nel cristianesimo occidentale* (Rome: 2005) 19–89, there 19–22, 31–42, 52–54; Boesch Gajano S., “La strutturazione della cristianità occidentale”, in: Benvenuti, *Storia della santità* 91–156, there 95.

⁶ Scorza Barcellona, “Le origini” 43–51.

⁷ Williamson B., “Altarpieces, Liturgy, and Devotion”, *Speculum* 79 (2004) 341–406, there 354–356.

In view of the omnipresence of martyrs' *memoriae* in Rome, having been the site, first, of innumerable persecutions of Christians and, subsequently, the capital of Latin Christianity, it is no surprise that Roman churches abounded with relics. Like elsewhere, the inventories of relics of churches grew longer and longer. The repositories of sacred corpses under the altars of churches in Rome gradually filled up with the skulls, bones, flesh and skin of hundreds of saints, as well as pieces of cloth and other relics *ex contactu*.

Heads were among the most valued items in these treasuries of sanctity. This can be evinced from lists of relics included in the guides made up in the course of the Middle Ages and the early modern period.⁸ The *Le sette chiese principali* (1570), a practical guide to the sacred places of Rome, written by Onofrio Panvinio (1530–1568), an Augustine friar renowned for his antiquarian studies, may serve as an example. In it, Panvinio gave an inventory of the relics kept in S. Pietro. First come the objects which had been touched by Jesus Christ himself: a piece of the cross, the *sudarium* (the sweat cloth with which Veronica had wiped the face of Christ), and the lance that had pierced the side of Christ. Then the complete bodies are mentioned: the bodies of the apostles Simon and Judas first, then the body of the virgin Petronilla, the bodies of the first ten popes after Peter, the bodies of a number of popes who died as martyrs, the bodies of several lay martyrs, the bodies of some eminent popes and other confessors. After that the heads were enumerated: again, first the head of an apostle, Andrew, then the heads of Luke the Evangelist, St. Sebastian, St. James of Persia, and St. Magnus. After that Panvinio continues with the arms, a shoulder, and a throat, to end with a list of generic *reliquie*, presumably so small and amorphous that their anatomical details were impossible to determine.⁹ There is a double hierarchy here, dictated partly by the

⁸ These guides can be traced back to the genre of *Mirabilia* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a genre that from the time of the first Jubilee (1300) onward branched out into guides stressing the monumental attractions of the city, on the one hand, and guides that explained the devotional destinations, on the other hand, with the two new genres contaminating one another continuously. See Palumbo G., *Giubileo Giubilei. Pellegrini e pellegrine, riti, santi, immagini per una storia dei sacri itinerari* (Rome: 1999) 127–143.

⁹ 'Il Sudario di N.S. Gesù Xpo., detto, di Veronica, [...]. La lancia, con la quale gli fù trafitto il costato, [...]. I corpi de i SS. Simone & Giuda Apostoli [...]. Il corpo di santa Petronilla [...]. I corpi de'i primi dieci santi Pontefici Romani, Lino, Cleto, Anacleto, Evaristo, Xisto, Telesforo, Higinio, Pio, Eleuthero, Vittore. I corpi de'SS. Fabiano, & Xisto ii. Pontefici, & martiri. I corpi de i Santi martiri Sebastiano, Gregorio, & Tiburtio. I corpi de i SS. Processo & Martiniano martiri. Il corpo di S. Giovanni Chrisostomo Vescovo di Costantinopoli & confessore, [...]. Il corpo di santo Gregorio Papa, & Dottore, [...]. Il corpo di

identity of the saint to which the relic belonged, and partly by the nature of the body part that remained. A complete body was more valuable than a head, and a head in turn was more valuable than any other body part.

Of the sacred heads kept in Rome, the first and foremost were of course those of the two most important apostles: Peter, the vicar of Christ and predecessor of the popes, and Paul, who laid the foundation for much of the theology of the Christian churches. Their relics introduce us to a pressing problem of martyrology in the Counter-Reformation. For all their lustre, even the bodies of the two major apostles had been transferred from place to place so often in the course of centuries that their remains had become mixed up and indistinguishable. Panvinio, when describing how Constantine the Great and pope Sylvester I relocated the body of S. Pietro to the newly consecrated high altar around 320, reports that 'according to some, the bones of both apostles [i.e. Peter and Paul] were divided equally and placed in the Churches dedicated to them'.¹⁰ The emperor and the pope had acquiesced in simply allotting half of the bones to S. Pietro and the other half to S. Paolo. Accordingly, when writing further on about the church of S. Paolo fuori le Mura, he notes that 'the other half of the bodies of Peter and Paul the apostles lie here'.¹¹ Panvinio was following a twelfth-century legend here, according to which the remains of Peter and Paul had been mixed up in the first centuries and the bones were subsequently divided equally between the churches of S. Pietro and S. Paolo.¹²

The skulls, easy to distinguish from the other bones, had been moved to the Lateran complex. According to Panvinio the heads of the apostles had been venerated in the oratory of S. Lorenzo, known as the Sancta Sanctorum, until Innocence III (1161–1216) had them moved to the high

S. Pietro Diacono della S. R. Chiesa sotto santo Gregorio Papa, [...]. La testa di santo Andrea Apostolo, [...]. Le teste di S. Luca Vangelista, di S. Sebastiano, di S. Giacomo di Persia, [...], & di S. Magno confessore [...]. Un braccio di santo Andrea Apostolo. La spalla di S. Stefano protomartire. Un braccio di santo Giosefo [...]. Un braccio di santo Longino martiere. La gola di santo Biasio Vescovo & martire. Le reliquie di [...]', Panvinio Onofrio, *Le sette chiese principali di Roma*, trans. M.A. Lanfranchi (Rome, A. Blado: 1570) 69–70.

¹⁰ 'dapoi con non minore allegrezza, S. Silvestro, & Constantino, levando il scaratissimo corpo di S. Pietro Apostolo da luogo più basso, con grandissimo honore lo collocarono sotto l'istesso altar grande', 'Scrivono alcuni, che i corpi de gli Apostoli amendue eugualmente divisi, furono nelle loro Chiese riposti, ma le teste, nella capella del palazzo Lateranense: [...]', Panvinio, *Le sette chiese* 49–51.

¹¹ 'In questa basilica santo Silvestro Papa ripose l'altra meza parte de'i corpi di santo Pietro, & di santo Paolo Apostoli in una pretiosissima cassa, sotto l'altar maggiore', Panvinio, *Le sette chiese* 87.

¹² Paravicini-Bagliani A., *The Pope's Body*, trans. D.S. Peterson (Chicago: 1994) 49–50, 268.

altar of S. Giovanni in Laterano, where they are still to be observed by the devout.¹³ In 1581 Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) had a look at them, as they were put on display the night before Easter Sunday. They were removed from their silver reliquaries for the occasion. Montaigne admires their fresh appearance, Peter having a white, oblong face with a vermilion hue, and a bifurcated beard, Paul a round, broad, corpulent face, and a thick beard. He must admit, though, that it was difficult to make out the details, as the heads were placed up high, behind thick iron bars.¹⁴ Their past peregrinations notwithstanding, by the time Montaigne saw them, the heads of Peter and Paul could be considered part of the sacred patrimony of Rome since time immemorial. The apostles had been among the founders of the Universal Church and in the light of the centrality of these relics, there was no question of the Catholic clergy allowing their authenticity to be contested seriously. As we will see, with less prominent head relics the story would be different.

Identity of the Body

If the perfunctory decapitation ending most martyrs' lives was accepted as unproblematic, the identity of martyrs' bodies and their heads was not. After the Council of Trent, as a result both of external pressure from Protestant critics and the desire for a disciplined devotional life within the Catholic Church itself, saints' cults and particularly the veneration of relics

¹³ 'Nel medesimo oratorio [i.e. the Sancta Sanctorum] giacquero similmente (come hò detto) gran tempo le teste de gli Apostoli Pietro, & Paolo, le quali Innocentio iii. di casa Conti ripose sotto l'altar del santo Salvatore in armarii di bronzo, [...]', 'Giacendo quivi con poca dignità queste reliquie, Urbano V. havendo fatto fabricare nella chiesa di S. Giovanni un'tabernacolo di marmo à ciò appropriato, le collocò sopra l'altar grande; [...]', Panvinio, *Le sette chiese* 239, 241. For the various traditions concerning the movements of the heads of Peter and Paul in the Middle Ages: Marangoni G., *Istoria dell'antichissimo oratorio, o cappella di San Lorenzo* (Rome, Stamperia di San Michele, per Ottavio Puccinelli: 1747) 260–263.

¹⁴ 'La veille de Pasques, je vis à S. Jean de Latran, les Chefs S. Pol & S. Pierre qu'on y montre, qui ont encore leur charnure, teint et barbe, come s'ils vivoient: S. Pierre, un visage blanc un peu longuet, le teint vermeil & tirant sur le sanguin, une barbe grise fourchue, la teste couverte d'une mitre papale; & S. Pol, noir, le visage large & plus gras, la teste plus grosse, la barbe grise, espesse. [...] Le lieu est élevée, de la hauteur d'une pique, et puis de grosses grilles de fer, au travers desquelles on voit. On alume autour par le dehors, plusieurs sierges; mais est mal aisé de discerner bien clerement toutes les particularités; je les vis à deus ou trois fois. La polissure de ces faces avoit quelque ressamblance à nos masques', Michel de Montaigne, *Journal du Voyage de Michel de Montaigne en Italie par la Suisse & l'Allemagne en 1580 & 1581* II (Rome – Paris, Chez Le Jay: 1774) 190–191.

were critically evaluated. This stimulated clergy to collect documentation serving to identify the thousands of body parts and objects collected in consecrated locations.¹⁵ Such documentation included not only written deeds and narratives, but also visual and material evidence.¹⁶ The most striking testimonies of the saints were the bodily remains themselves. Relics were physical markers that facilitated devotion towards saints, by making them present again. After Trent relics also came to serve as evidence of the saints' actual historical existence, notably the hundreds of skulls and bones found in the catacombs that testified to the historical reality of the lives of the martyrs.¹⁷ This led to the peculiar situation that relics, the objects of veneration, became material evidence of the legitimacy of that veneration at the same time. This is evinced well by the Oratorian father Antonio Gallonio (1556–1605) in his infamous *Trattato de gli instrumenti del martirio*, identifying – in this case – not a head or another bodily part but a weapon with which martyrs supposedly had been tortured:

The claw was a type of iron pliers, as can be observed in the specimen that up to this day is kept among the relics of the holy Basilica Vaticana, which I inspected and unworthily touched and kissed¹⁸

Gallonio scrutinizes the object and touches and kisses it at the same time, stressing that he both contemplated the features that certified its

¹⁵ Ditchfield, *Liturgy, sanctity and history* 24–66.

¹⁶ Peter Burke calls this a 'visual turn': Burke P., "Images as Evidence in Seventeenth-Century Europe", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003) 273–296. In this article Burke builds upon earlier discussions of the increased importance of visual and material evidence by Francis Haskell and Arnaldo Momigliano: Haskell F., *History and its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven CT: 1993); Momigliano A., "Ancient History and the Antiquarian", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13 (1950) 285–315.

¹⁷ Cantino Wataghin G., "Archeologia e 'archeologie'. Il rapporto con l'antico fra mito, arte e ricerca", in: Settis S. (ed.), *Memoria dell'antico nell'arte italiana I. L'uso dei classici* (Turin: 1984) 171–221, there 206–210; Palumbo G., "'L'Assedio delle reliquie' alla città di Roma. Le reliquie oltre la devozione nello sguardo dei pellegrini", *Roma moderna e contemporanea* 5 (1997) 377–399, there 380–384; Ditchfield S., "Leggere e vedere Roma come icona culturale (1500–1800 circa)", in: Fiorani L. – Prosperi A. (eds.), *Storia d'Italia Einaudi. Annali 16 Roma, la città del papa. Vita civile e religiosa dal giubileo di Bonifacio VIII al giubileo di Papa Wojtyła* (Turin: 2000) 31–72, there 50–56; Ghilardi M., "Le catacombe di Roma dal Medioevo alla Roma sotterranea di Antonio Bosio", *Studi Romani* 40 (2001) 27–56, there 34–37.

¹⁸ "Erano le ungule, secondo che si vede in quella, che sino al giorno di hoggi, nella sacrosanta Basilica Vaticana fra le reliquie si custodisce, da me veduta, & indegnamente toccata, e basciata, una specie di tanaglie di ferro", Gallonio Antonio, *Trattato de gli instrumenti di martirio, e delle varie maniere di martoriare usate da' gentili contro christiani* (Rome, Ascanio and Girolamo Donangeli: 1591) 62.

supposed martyrological function, and revered its saintliness for having been in contact with the bodies of the Christian victims of the Roman emperor.

In the last paragraph we saw Montaigne comment on the state of completeness of the heads of the two most important apostles. In their case identification was hardly a requirement as the written tradition seemed to offer plenty of evidence for the factuality of their identity, and the wholeness of the heads served mainly to satisfy the devotion and the curiosity of the Frenchman, rather than his desire for authentication. For less prominent saints a complete head provided valuable documentation that it was what it purported to be, as well as an attractive locus of devotion.

The presence of a head was a perfect document for the historical reality of a saint, but in part this only shifted the problem, as the identity of the head then had to be ascertained. Usually the first reflex was to look for historical accounts that guaranteed the relic's authenticity. In the early modern period a new industry arose in response to the need for certified authentication of relics. The convent of S. Silvestro in Capite, for instance, that possessed the relics not only of pope Sylvester I ('head and body') and Stephen the Protomartyr, but also the head of John the Baptist, went through pains to have the authenticity of the latter certified. The cathedral of Amiens in France held a rival relic purported to be the head of John the Baptist, as well.¹⁹

Giovanni Giacchetti, confessor of the Poor Clares of the Roman convent in the first half of the seventeenth century, asserted the identity of the head of the Baptist on the grounds of historical documentation. The priest did not mention any physical feature of the head (which in fact is a rather undistinguished skull covered with what looks like mummified skin). Instead, he reconstructed the chronology of the head travelling from the Near East to Rome. He countered the charge that the head had been found in Constantinople only in 1206, with extensive historical evidence that implied that the Frankish king Pippin had acquired the head from Constantinople already in the eighth century, after which it had made its way to Rome where it had been since the thirteenth century. For Giacchetti such a chronological reconstruction was 'the foundation of historical truth', apparently a more authoritative argument in favour

¹⁹ Toesca I., "Il reliquiario della testa di San Giovanni Battista nella chiesa di San Silvestro in Capite a Roma", *Bollettino d'Arte* 4th series, 46 (1961) 307–314, there 313.

of the authenticity of the Baptist's head than any investigation of its appearance.²⁰

Much like the certification of the head of John the Baptist, in many other cases the verification of the identity of heads and other bodily relics was also conducted by procuring written evidence, historical writings and written testimonies, and comparing them. It was rare to adduce arguments based on the physical characteristics of the heads themselves. This has been an important conclusion of the investigations into this theme by Simon Ditchfield.²¹ In some cases, however, the physical appearance of the head did indeed contribute to the identification of the saint in question.

A budding awareness of the importance of the physical characteristics of head relics is noticeable, for instance, in a report sent to the Oratorian father Gallonio. This priest, who stressed his devotion for the sacred pliers in S. Pietro before describing his investigation of the object, eagerly gathered information on all kinds of relics being venerated in churches around the Catholic world. One of his correspondents was Fabrizio Paolucci (1556–1625), a prelate who was involved in the administration of papal dominions in the Romagna, in the North-East of Italy.²² Paolucci travelled through northern Italy in 1598, probably following the trail of curial officers that accompanied pope Clement VIII (1536–1605) in his annexation of Ferrara.²³ The prelate sent Gallonio lists of relics with short remarks about

²⁰ 'Queste 4. contradizioni [i.e. against the charge that the head in S. Silvestro in Capite was not the true head of st. John the Baptist] hò fatto per adesso, intorno al calcolo del tempo, il quale sole essere fundamento della verità historica lasciando altre difficoltà, et contraditioni bastando queste quattro per adesso', Archivio di Stato di Roma, Clarisse Francescane S. Silvestro in Capite, Vol. B.4995, fol. 216v. See also Giacchetti G., *Iconologia Salvatoris, & karologia praecursoris, sive de imagine Salvatoris ad regem Abagarum missa: & de capite S. Io. Baptistae praecursoris Romae in ecclesia Monialium S. Silvestri* (Rome, Bernardino Tano: 1628). On Giacchetti, see: Vecchiotti F., *Biblioteca picena, o sia notizie istoriche delle opere e degli scrittori piceni* V (Osimo, D.A. Quercetti: 1796) 205.

²¹ Most importantly as far as the continued 'logocentrism' of martyrology in the Italian Counter-Reformation is concerned: Ditchfield S., "Text before Trowel: Antonio Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea* Revisited", in: Swanson R.N. (ed.), *The Church Retrospective: Papers read at the 1995 Summer Meeting and the 1996 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Woodbridge: 1997) 343–360.

²² Jaitner K., "Der Hof Clemens' VIII. (1592–1605). Eine Prosopographie", *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 84 (2004) 137–331, there 210. On Paolucci, see also Ughelli F., *Italia sacra sive De episcopis Italiae et insularum adjacentium* I (Rome, Bernardino Tano: 1644–1662) 593.

²³ See for the entrance of Clement VIII in Ferrara: Mitchell B., "A Papal Progress in 1598", in: Wisch B. – Scott Munshower S. (eds.), *'All the World's a Stage...': Art and Pageantry in the Renaissance and the Baroque* I (University Park PA: 1990) 118–135.

the cult with which they were associated. In the coastal town of Rimini Paolucci had visited the church of S. Giuliano. Its name giver was highly esteemed among the local population for having arrived from the Balkans floating across the Adriatic Sea in his tomb. In the church of S. Giuliano in Rimini, besides the sarcophagus in which the cadaver had navigated the waves of the Adriatic, the head of the saint was kept as well, with some skin and red facial hair left intact. It could be distinguished from the heads of seven other unidentified saints because of the teeth which 'were small, denoting his youthful age'.²⁴ According to tradition, St. Julian had been only eighteen when he was seized and brought before Marcianus, the governor of an unnamed Aegean city, who ordered the young man to be thrown off a cliff when he refused to renounce the Christian faith.²⁵ The small teeth of the skull served to prove the identity of the particular martyr to which it had belonged.

This awareness of the consequences that the events, recounted in hagiographical narratives, must have had for the appearance of the physical remains of the martyrs, was developed more explicitly by Antonio Bosio (ca. 1571–1629). The famous explorer of the catacombs and designated founder of 'Christian archaeology' prepared the most extensive study of the sacred spoils scattered in the churches and in the corridors of the underground cemeteries of Rome to see the light in the early modern period.²⁶ The interest of Bosio in the early Christian sepulchres is generally attributed to his acquaintance with the Oratorians, the same order that Gallonio belonged to, though there are no traces of Bosio and

²⁴ 'Nella Chiesa di S. Giuliano vi è il sepolcro del Santo Giuliano quale venne à galleggiare sul mare con quattro facole accese e si fermò al Lido di Rimino [...] Ivi ancora dicono essere sette altre teste di santi incogniti, che la sua testa ha un pezzo con la cotica e pelo rosso, et i denti sono piccoli denotanti la sua gioventù, et essere ancora il sacco col quale fù gettato in mare', Biblioteca Vallicelliana Ms. H.3 fol. 17r.

²⁵ 'Iulianus Christi Martyr erat ex Anazarbena urbe oriundus, [...]. Postquam autem annos attigisset aetatis suae octodecim, adductus est in Aegaeam civitatem, et ab idololatriis oblatu Marciiano Praesidi, et impulsus ad sacrificandum idolis, noluit obedire. [...] At S. Iulianum iniicientes in saccum, serpentibus venenatis et arena plenum, proiecerunt in mare', Bolland J. – Henschen G. (eds.), *Acta Sanctorum Martii* II (Antwerp, Alphonsus Greuse: 1668) 421. The Jesuits cite four medieval Greek sources for the very concise life story of Julian.

²⁶ For Bosio as the founder of Christian archaeology: Ghilardi M., *Subterranea civitas. Quattro studi sulle catacombe romane dal medioevo all'età moderna* (Rome: 2003) 7–13, representing the most recent generation of historians of Christian archaeology that attribute a founding role to Bosio, continuing an appreciation that goes back in modern times to De Rossi G.B., *La Roma sotterranea cristiana, descritta ed illustrata* (Rome: 1864–1877, repr. Frankfurt a. Main: 1966) 26–46. For the biography of Bosio: Parise N., "Bosio, Antonio", in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani XIII Borremans-Bracanzolo* (Rome: 1971) 257–259.

Gallonio having actively collaborated, the latter even denying that he knew Bosio personally in 1602.²⁷ Bosio's book on the catacombs was published posthumously as *Roma sotterranea* in 1632, edited by Giovanni Severano (ca. 1546–1640), who was a member of the Oratory.²⁸

In his description of the catacombs underneath the Via Appia and the Via Ardeatina, named after pope Calixtus I († ca. 223), Bosio expresses his amazement at the elements that positively indicate that the bodies discovered had really belonged to Christian martyrs. After having dwelt on the salubrious nature of the groundwater and on the earthenware containers with coagulated blood in them, he mentions the skulls found in the graves: 'In one of the graves we have found one head among the others, which was cleft in the middle, and the head of the axe was still in it'. Apart from this specific specimen he mentions 'other skulls [...], which had several bruises, and we believe they were of holy martyrs who had been beaten with *plumbatae*' (whips, equipped with lead).²⁹ Instead of adducing a physical characteristic mentioned in hagiography in support of the identity of a specific martyr, Bosio's observations identified the heads generically as having belonged to martyrs. The bodily traces of martyrdom in this instance were more important as indicators of the physical effect of the whip, than in identifying any specific saint.

Bosio's attention for the cranial traces of martyrdom might have been prompted by the tightening regulation of the hunt for relics which the papacy progressively enforced in the course of the seventeenth century. Ever since 1575, when devout adventurers started to explore the catacombs in search of the remains of martyrs, the papacy felt compelled to take measures to curb excessive zeal and deceit. Counterfeit relics soon surfaced. In 1603 Clement VIII issued an edict subjecting unauthorized excavators

²⁷ In a letter to cardinal Federico Borromeo of 19 October 1602, Gallonio wrote that he did not know the author of a book on cemeteries that was almost ready to be printed: 'Del autore del libro de' Cimiteri non so che scriverle; ho parlato ad uno suo grande intrinseco amico, il quale ha veduta l'opera, et mi ha detto che egli è di già in ordine, [...]'. Se potro cavarne altro lo farò intendere a V. S. Ill.ma, ancorche io non conosca l'autore', Biblioteca Ambrosiana Ms. G.189inf fol. 93r. This book on the Christian cemeteries must have been Bosio's preparatory material for the *Roma sotterranea*, of which a first version was ready long before the final book was published posthumously.

²⁸ Bosio A., *Roma sotterranea nella quale si tratta de' sacri cimiterii di Roma*, ed. G. Severano (Rome, G. Mascardi: 1632; repr. Rome: 1998).

²⁹ 'In una di dette sepolture trovammo una Testa frà l'altre, la qual'era stata da un'accetta fessa per mezzo; & in essa vi era ancora il ferro della medesima accetta. Altre Teste ancora habbiamo osservato, che havevano diverse percosse, e crediamo fossero di Santi Martiri, ch'erano stati battuti con piombate', Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* 196.

in the catacombs to excommunication. His successors Paul V and Urban VIII issued decrees to the same effect in 1613 and 1624, respectively. Gregory XV installed a commission in 1622, officially charged with the extraction and recognition of relics.³⁰ In other words, ascertaining that the skulls found underground had indeed belonged to martyrs became vital to the endorsement on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities.

Integrity of the Body

From the end of the sixteenth century onwards, the physical characteristics of objects thus started to provide supplementary data for the identification of saints and their bodily remains, in addition to the written documentation that, admittedly, remained the prime base of evidence. This invited critical reflection on the state of the remains themselves. The documentary function of saintly bodies led to an appreciation of the integrity of bodies – and of the violability of that integrity. The bodies of saints, like those of normal mortals, had a fixed structure, which should include a head, arms, legs, hands and feet, as well as more minute parts such as hair, nails and ribs. If something was missing, it should be elsewhere, and if more than the regular number of parts was reported, one of those parts must be spurious. This was all the more acute in the case of head relics, as their absence or supernumerary presence was so obvious.

This becomes apparent, once again, in the works of Bosio and the Oratorians. In 1599 cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrati (1560–1618) and cardinal Cesare Baronio (1538–1607), himself an Oratorian and author of the famous multivolume *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1588–1602), inspected the space underneath the altar of the church of S. Cecilia in Trastevere, the titular church of cardinal Sfondrati. The bodies of several saints besides that of Cecilia herself were found: the body of Valerianus, her fiancé, that of Tiburtius, the brother of the latter, and the body of Maximus, an associate. The first of the bodies lifted from underneath the altar was headless. In his account of the find (1600), Antonio Bosio argued that, since the head of Tiburtius

³⁰ Ditchfield, *Liturgy, Sanctity and History* 87–88; Ghilardi M., “‘Auertendo, che per l'osservanza si caminà con ogni rigore’. Editti seicenteschi contro l'estrazione delle reliquie dalle catacombe romane”, *Sanctorum* 2 (2005) 121–137; Ghilardi M., “*Quae signa erant illa, quibus putabant esse significativa Martyrii?*” Note sul riconoscimento ed autenticazione delle reliquie delle catacombe romane nella prima età moderna”, *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 122 (2010) 81–106.

was kept in a tabernacle outside the church building, the headless torso of that first holy body to have been uncovered must belong to him.³¹

A similar consideration led Gallonio to criticize Pompeo Ugonio (†1614), professor of Rhetoric at the Sapienza, author of a well-known inventory of the sacred patrimony of Rome (1588).³² In his collection of *vitae* of Roman virgin saints, Gallonio ends most biographies with an indication of the location of their relics. Concerning St. Beatrix he remarks that parts of her body and of those of her brothers were distributed among different churches in Rome. Stone and metal slabs listing the names of the saints whose relics were deposited in the altars in the different churches might mention 'the body' of saints like Beatrix and her brothers. Because of the trafficking of sacred bodies among religious institutes in the course of the ages, these bodies tended to become fragmented, so Gallonio observes, even though the slabs with the inventories of relics remained in their places in the churches unchanged, easily giving the impression that the relics kept by those churches consisted of the complete bodies of the saints. The Oratorian took issue with Ugonio for unquestioningly copying the claims from these inventories, without comparing them with the inventories of other churches. As a result Ugonio in his *Historia delle Stationi di Roma*, 'taking a part for the whole, put the same body in various places'.³³ In fact, Ugonio does localize the bodies of Sts. Beatrix, Cecilia and Praxedis all in more than one church.³⁴

Gallonio required of his contemporaries a greater awareness of the integrity of bodies and their constituent parts, and of breaches of that

³¹ '[...] distingui potuerunt: nempè quod primum erat S. Tiburtii, secundum in medio positum S. Valeriani, tertium verò Sancti Maximi; nam [...], corpus S. Tiburtii ab illo S. Valeriani eo argomento recognitum est, quoniam Sancti Tiburtii corpus capite carebat, cum foris in Ecclesia proprio in tabernaculo conservaretur', Bosio A., *Historia passionis B. Caeciliae virginis, Valeriani, Tiburtii, et Maximi martyrum necnon Urbani, et Lucii pontificum, et mart. Vitae. Atque Paschalis papae I. literae de eorundem Sanctorum corporum inventione, et in Urbem translatione* (Rome, Guglielmo Facciotti: 1600) 158.

³² Ugonio P., *Historia delle Stationi di Roma* (Rome, Bonfadino: 1588). On Ugonio: "Ugonio, Pompeo", in: *Enciclopedia cattolica*, ed. G. Pizzardo (Città del Vaticano: 1949–1954) vol. XII, cols. 715–716; Herklotz I., "Historia sacra und mittelalterliche Kunst während der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts in Rom", in De Maio R. e.a. (eds.), *Baronio e l'arte: atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Sora 10–13 ottobre 1984* (Sora: 1985) 21–74, there 39–50, 73–74; McGinness F.J., *Right Thinking and Sacred Oratory in Counter-Reformation Rome* (Princeton: 1995) 12–14.

³³ 'pagliando la parte per lo tutto, ha posto un medesimo corpo in diversi luoghi', Gallonio A., *Historia delle sante vergini romane con varie annotationi e con alcune vite brevi de' santi parenti loro* (Rome, Ascanio e Girolamo Donangeli: 1591).

³⁴ Ugonio, *Historia delle stationi* fols. 71v, 134r, 220r–220v, 278r, 300v.

integrity, than had been common earlier. In the Middle Ages two parts of the head of Saint X might have both merited the designation 'the head of Saint X', warranting the endless partitioning of saints' corporeal remains somewhat like the continuous dilution of medicine effected in homeopathy. Gallonio's censure of Ugonio shows that, for instance, a head could now be registered as 'the head of Saint X' only if no more than one institute possessed remains of the head. If a church or convent or chapel possessed only a splinter of the skull, whereas another possessed the scalp, their inventories of relics should list these fragments as such. In a period in which the proliferation of the relics of one and the same saint was among the favourite objects of scorn for the Protestants, the generosity that Ugonio displayed had to give way to greater accuracy.³⁵

Increasing Accuracy

Accordingly, a slight shift in the way the presence of relics was registered can be discerned between 1570 and 1630, judging from the guides of sacred items to be found and venerated in Rome. Onofrio Panvinio in 1570 reported that the church of S. Pietro possessed, among the many corpses of martyrs and confessors, 'the bodies of the martyr saints Sebastian, Gregory and Tiburtius'.³⁶ His designation of the body of the saints is unqualified, even though browsing the pages of the book, it appears that both the church of S. Sebastiano and the catacomb of S. Calisto held the body of Sebastian as well. Moreover, the head of the saint was listed separately among S. Pietro's relics, while his arm was listed separately among those of the church of S. Sebastiano, and S. Paolo possessed three different generic relics of Sebastian.³⁷

Giovanni Severano, the first editor of Bosio's *Roma sotterranea*, published a similar guide to the relics of Rome in 1630, the *Memorie sacre delle sette chiese di Roma*. Severano was a lot more specific than Panvinio about the movements of the parts of the body of Sebastian, explaining the way in which the body had been dissembled in the course of history and pointing out the various locations in which its fragments had ended up. Severano gives a general overview of the history of the saint's body in the

³⁵ MacCulloch D., *Reformation. Europe's House divided, 1490–1700* (London: 2003) 102; Palumbo, "L'Assedio delle reliquie" 382, 392.

³⁶ Panvinio, *Le sette chiese* 69.

³⁷ Panvinio, *Le sette chiese* 70, 105, 118–121, 123, 126.

section on the basilica of S. Sebastiano fuori le Mura. After having been disposed of by the Roman soldiers who executed him in the main sewer of the city, the body of Sebastian was salvaged by St. Lucina, who provided for its proper burial in the catacomb of S. Calisto. Pope Gregory IV (827–844) then separated the skull from the body and had it set in a silver reliquary that ended up in the church of Ss. Quattro Coronati. In the thirteenth century pope Honorius III (†1227) subsequently transferred the body of Sebastian to the church of S. Sebastiano.³⁸ In the section on S. Pietro, the Oratorian author gives a list of saints whose ‘bodies’ were venerated as relics in this church. Here he mentions Sebastian, specifying that the saint’s body used to be here, but had been removed to another place (the translation under Honorius III), except the head, that had remained in S. Pietro, though with the skull removed (being stored separately in Ss. Quattro Coronati). Further on, among the sacred heads in S. Pietro, a ‘head without the skull’ is listed separately.³⁹

It is not entirely clear what Sebastian’s ‘head without the skull’ exactly consisted of. Possibly Severano inferred the movements of the parts of Sebastian’s body purely from the documents he had at his disposal, without ever inspecting the single bodily parts from up close. Nevertheless, he felt at least impelled to reconstruct the fate of the individual parts, unlike Panvinio, who merely integrated the inventories of relics of different historical sources, much like Ugonio did, to Gallonio’s dismay. Severano managed to trace the history of St. Sebastian’s body in such a way that most of Panvinio’s mentions of the saint’s relics could be accommodated in the peregrination: first the body in the catacomb of S. Calisto, then the body in S. Pietro, with the skull subsequently removed, finally the body in S. Sebastiano, except the head that remained in S. Pietro. Only the unspecified relics of the saint in S. Paolo and the separately listed arm in S. Sebastiano are not explicitly traced in Severano’s history of the saint’s body, but those relics were less remarkable and would not have raised the eyebrows of critical readers as much as the multiple occurrences of his head or his

³⁸ Severano G., *Memorie sacre delle sette chiese di Roma e di altri luoghi, che si trovano per le strade di esse* (Rome, G. Mascardi: 1630) 446–451.

³⁹ ‘Vi erano ancora i Corpi de SS. Gorgonio, Tiburtio, e Sebastiano [...] Alcuni però delli sopradetti sono stati trasferiti in altre Chiese, particolarmente quello di S. Sebastiano, del quale vi è restata la testa, senza il Cranio: [...]; ‘L[a] test[a] di [...] S. Sebastiano senza Cranio: il qual Cranio poi con altre Reliquie fù ritrovato nella Confessione della Chiesa di Ss. Quattro l’anno 1624. dove era stato trasferito da S. Leone IV’, Severano, *Memorie sacre delle sette chiese* 136–138.

body would have. Severano thus heeded Gallonio's implicit demand for an accurate reconstruction of the dismemberment of the sacred bodies.

The accuracy regarding the integrity of relics of heads and other bodily parts that we see developing among the Oratorians (but the same could be said for the Jesuits, for instance) almost backfired in the case of cardinal Baronio. In 1589 cardinal Agostino Cusano (1542–1598) found the bodies of the first-century saints Flavia Domitilla, Nereus and Achilleus under the main altar of his title church of S. Adriano al Foro. Baronio was created cardinal in 1597 and selected the derelict basilica of SS. Nereo ed Achilleo as his titular church. Pope Clement VIII, a great benefactor of the Oratorians, immediately gave permission to the new cardinal to obtain the relics of the namegivers of his titular church from cardinal Cusano. The pope stimulated the Oratorian cardinal to parade the relics through Rome in a splendid translation ceremony.⁴⁰ The bodies of Flavia Domitilla, a first-century member of the imperial family of the Flavians, and her two eunuch servants Nereus and Achilleus were carried around the city in a veritable triumphal procession worthy of the ancient consuls.⁴¹

During the preparations Baronio visited the basilica of S. Sebastiano fuori le Mura and happened upon the table listing the relics in possession of that church. To his amazement these included the heads of Nereus and Achilleus which had been enshrined in new reliquaries not long before. This suggested that the skulls purportedly belonging to the eunuchs' bodies, recently acquired by the Oratorian, in fact were not theirs after all. The matter caused some embarrassment, threatening to turn an occasion for devotional spectacle into a farce. Measures were taken to ensure that the recognition of the original bodies in S. Adriano al Foro, the titular church of cardinal Cusano, was not compromised. The Oratorians ascertained that the alleged heads of Sts. Nereus and Achilleus in the patrimony of S. Sebastiano consisted of mere fragments of their skulls. Baronio had permission from pope Clemens VIII to dispose of the competing relics in S. Sebastiano as he saw fit, even though the church fell under the authority

⁴⁰ Krautheimer R., "A Christian Triumph of 1597", in: Fraser D. – Hibbard H. – Lewine M.J. (eds.), *Essays in the History of Art presented to Rudolf Wittkower. Essays in the History of Art* (London: 1967) 174–178; Ditchfield, "Leggere e vedere Roma" 38–43; Toubert J., "Saints of the past saints of the present", in: Mugnaini F. – Ó Héalaí P. – Thompson T. (eds.), *The Past in the Present. A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Catania: 2006) 67–86.

⁴¹ Described in detail by Antonio Gallonio in Biblioteca Vallicelliana Ms. G.99, fols. 11–17.

of cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani (1550–1622).⁴² He decided to have the relics from S. Sebastiano included in the procession. Thus Gallonio, who described the procession in great detail, explains apologetically:

relics of the blessed martyrs then were procured [...] chiefly from two churches, one of which was the deaconry of S. Adriano, in which the heads and the body are said to lie; the other indeed of S. Sebastiano fuori le Mura; in the latter, in as far as a part of the relics of the heads of Sts. Nereus and Achilleus is kept, enclosed in gilded holders with inscriptions as follows: "From the head of St. Nereus, and from the head of St. Achilleus".⁴³

Gallonio makes sure to stress that even the epigraphical documentation serving to identify the relics, the inscriptions on the new reliquaries, limited the relics to being fragments of the heads of the saints. After the translation ceremony, Baronio prepared for the pieces of the skulls of Nereus and Achilleus to be sent to the sister house of the Oratory in Naples. In one of the letters in which he set out the details, Baronio sneered that the new reliquaries with beards were flawed, since Nereus and Achilleus, being eunuchs, surely would have had shaven faces. He ordered that detail to be adjusted. It would seem that these preparations entailed a deliberate attempt to remove the inconvenient pieces of skull from the vicinity of the cardinal's titular church.⁴⁴ In 1604 Baronio had new silver reliquaries forged for his heads of Sts. Nereus and Achilleus.⁴⁵

Whether the competing head relics of Nereus and Achilleus were indeed sent to Naples or not, in any case they were to be found again in

⁴² In a letter of Cesare Baronio to Antonio Talpa, 16 May 1597: 'Accascò, che andando io alle sette Chiese, in S. Sebastiano lessi nella tavoletta, dove erano scritte le reliquie, che erano in quella Chiesa, & trovai ivi scritto: *Caput S. Nerei, & Caput S. Achillei*: del che mi maravigliai non poco, essendo le lor teste ritrovate con gli lor Corpi in S. Adriano dal Titular del loco, cioè dal Cardinal Cusano, quale levate da i Corpi le haveva messe in casse indorate, & esposte sopra l'Altare *publicae venerationi*, quali già da me furono [...] di là levate, & portate in casa mia', published in: Alberici R. (ed.), *Ven. Cardinalis Caesaris Baronii Epistolae et Opuscula* (Rome: 1770) vol. III, 84. For the other details concerning this episode: Cistellini A., *San Filippo Neri, l'Oratorio e la Congregazione oratoriana. Storia e spiritualità* vol. II (Brescia: 1989) 1164–1165, Cistellini evokes the discomfort caused by the head relics in the S. Sebastiano thus: 'La cosa si prestava al ridicolo, oltre che riuscire scandalosa'.

⁴³ 'Extractae autem fuerunt Beatorum Martyrum reliquiae ex duabus potissimum Basilicis, [...], quarum altera fuit S. Hadriani Diaconia, in qua et capita, et corpora quiescere dicebantur, [...]; Altera vero S. Sebastiani extra Urbis muros via Appia; in ea siquidem pars reliquiarum capitum SS. Nerei et Achillei inauratis thecis inclusa asservabatur cum huiusmodi inscriptionibus De capite sancti Nerei martyris, et de capite sancti Achillei', Biblioteca Vallicelliana Ms. G.99, fol. 12v.

⁴⁴ Cistellini, *San Filippo Neri* vol. II, 1165.

⁴⁵ Archivio di Stato di Roma, Cong. Oratorio Roma, vol. 145, fol. 155r.

the Roman basilica soon afterwards. Severano, in his *Memorie sacre* of 1630, reported them once more among the relics of the S. Sebastiano fuori le Mura. Significantly, the Oratorian was again more detailed in his report than Panvinio had been sixty years earlier. Panvinio in his section on the churches along the Via Appia had mentioned the relics of 'the heads of St. Nereus, Achilleus, and some other martyrs'.⁴⁶ Severano, in line with the somatographic accuracy which had emerged in the meantime, but also with an eye on the incident that had threatened to embarrass one of the greatest members of his order, now specified that S. Sebastiano possessed 'parts of the heads of Sts. Nereus and Achilleus'.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Oratorians and scholars around them – Panvinio, Ugonio, Bosio – are generally viewed as the predecessors to the *Bollandistes* that refounded hagiography on a critical basis in the seventeenth century, a project that would continue well into the modern age and that still continues. The thousands of pages of hagiographical writing, which include details of the cult of the saints and the fate of their bodily remains as well as of their biographies, showed little development as the centuries progressed. The stereotypical accounts of martyrdom and miracles were translated, imitated and emulated time and again. Whereas in the twentieth century De Gaiffier expressed his anxiety at the historical veracity of the undistinguished decapitations that ended so many martyrs' lives, the scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth century felt no qualms about the improbable uniformity of the *passiones*.

Yet, in paying close attention to the dealings of the first generations of these critical hagiographers with a particular element of saints' veneration – the storage and veneration of saints' heads – we find not only a big gap between early modern and postwar scholarship, but also a change within only a few decades in the Counter-Reformation. The enumeration and description of head relics show an increasing accuracy in describing the physical characteristics of bodily remains in the course of sixty years.

⁴⁶ 'Le teste di santo Nereo, Archilleo, Acoristo, & si S. Valentina & Lucina martiri', Panvinio, *Le sette chiese* 126.

⁴⁷ 'Parte delle teste di SS. Nereo, & Acchilleo', Severano, *Memorie sacre delle sette chiese* 451.

This accuracy was apologetic in intent, to be sure. After the crisis of the Reformation the Church of Rome scrambled on her feet and started to pull everything out of the closet to buttress her claims to universality. The Church was built on the skulls, hair and blood of the saints, so those had to be salvaged, together with Mary, the Vulgate and the papacy. At the outset texts, rather than relics, provided the certification for the authenticity of the venerated remains of martyrs and confessors. Around 1600, however, we see some adjustments in the inventories and reports of the depositories of entire corpses, severed heads and other body parts. The adjustments were *ad hoc* rather than based on a program. But by the time that Paolo Aringhi produced his Latin version of Bosio's *Subterranean Rome*, multiple heads of one and the same saint could not easily be found anymore scattered around Rome, or the rest of the Catholic world, for that matter. Either the specific consistency of the head relic had to be specified – be it a skull, a jaw or even a bone fragment – or someone had to give up his claim to possess a saint's head.

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FRAMING THE FACE.
PATTERNS OF PRESENTATION AND REPRESENTATION
IN EARLY MODERN DRESS AND PORTRAITURE

Bert Watteeuw

On later visits to the Rijksmuseum I accompanied my father with growing reluctance, his admiration for Rembrandt and Hals left me increasingly indifferent; by then my eyes had been seduced by cubism and these portraits of ladies and gentlemen in impossible ruffs appeared ever more dull, dreary and drab to me.¹

Carel Willink, 1949

The remarkable neckwear in which early modern sitters appear on portraits has blinded us very effectively. Whiteness and cleanliness are not to be blamed for dazzling us. It is sheer repetition that blurs our focus and fatigues our gaze. Plain familiarity lulls us into the unquestioned acceptance of one of history's most remarkable sartorial phenomena. The mediocre painter Willink thought of ruffs as impossible on the one hand, but dull, dreary and drab on the other. The objective of this article is to dispel his bored indifference, in other words, to make the familiar strange again.² I will argue that the ruff is no mere superficial whim of fashion, but a crucial element of dress that embodies fundamental social and cultural values. The visual medium of portraiture, through which we are most familiar with the ruff, is in itself intimately related to the iconological archetype of the severed head as the ruff is designed to set apart heads, producing decapitated bodies and disembodied heads in the process. When art historians do direct their attention to ruffs, it is generally

¹ 'Met steeds groter tegenzin vergezelde ik mijn vader op latere bezoeken aan het Rijksmuseum, zijn bewondering voor Rembrandt en Hals liet mij steeds onverschilliger; steeds doffer, kleurlozer en saaier werden deze in onmogelijke kragen gedoken heren- en damesconterfeitsels in mijn door de kubisten verleide ogen'. Willink A.C., "Cézannes nalaten-schap onder benefice van inventaris aanvaard", *Libertinage* 2 (1949) 92.

² Through the eyes of a cultural outsider, we can regain a sense of amazement. For his autumn 2002 collection fashion designer Junya Watanabe created an extraordinary dress, a ruff that has outgrown its normal proportion to cover the entire body. The stunning design is shown on the cover of: Koda H., *Extreme Beauty. The Body Transformed* (New York: 2004).

in an effort to date a portrait.³ Occasionally an attribution is supported by the meticulous observation of the rendering of pleated linen or the textural qualities of painted lace.⁴ A ruff painted well functioned as a warranty of veracity and as a signature, a testimony to the painter's personal talent. In the tenth chapter of his 1604 *Schilder-boeck*, devoted to *Laken oft Draperinghe* (cloth or drapery), Karel van Mander includes the following advice, thus underlining the importance of this painterly skill:

And as the branches grace the trees,
So do here the edges and seams,
Pleasing in hanging, lying or swaying⁵

As useful and necessary as the endeavour of dating and attributing a portrait on the grounds of painted neckwear may be, by completely ignoring its cultural significance the procedure tends to reduce the ruff to a mute yet handy diagnostic. To fully appreciate the eloquence of dress, the complete silhouette should be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, it is quite clear that the ruff in particular has become an icon for the period between 1550 and 1650, matched only by the wig for the eighteenth century, the corset for the nineteenth century and blue jeans for the second half of the twentieth century. The iconic nature of the garment was fully understood by the directors of the same Rijksmuseum where Willink fell victim to ennui. In 1966, they gave graphic designer Dick Elffers the assignment of creating a general poster for the august institution. The result was a very effective crowd puller that showcased a *pièce de résistance* in stylish black and white, a spectacular flat collar in reticella lace. The eagerness with which the piece was promoted as a symbol of the collection

³ Leaning heavily on costume history as an auxiliary science, for the Low Countries Derkinderen-Besier's seminal contributions remain useful to greater and lesser extents: Derkinderen-Besier J. der, *Mode-metamorphosen. De kledij onzer voorouders in de zestiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: 1933); idem, *Spelevaart der mode. De kledij onzer voorouders in de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: 1950). The unmediated use of such surveys to date portraits with precision has recently been questioned, particularly as the speed with which a sitter might follow a new fashion would vary according to age, social circle and denomination. Winkel M. de, *Fashion and Fancy. Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam: 2006) 40 and 144.

⁴ Biesboer P., "Pieter Jacobsz. Olycan: A Portrait and Burgomaster Revealed", in Koetser D. (ed.), *A Portrait of Pieter Jacobsz. Olycan: Frans Hals Re-discovered* (Zurich: 2006) 8–16, espec. 10.

⁵ 'En ghelijck de tackskens cieren de boomen, Alsoo doen hier oock de canten en soomen, In 'thangen oft ligghen, met swieren aerdich', Mander Karel van, *Den Grondt der edel vry Schilder-const [1604]*, ed. H. Miedema, vol. I (Utrecht: 1973) 241.

of seventeenth-century paintings proved fatal, since the collar eventually turned out to be a nineteenth-century forgery.⁶

To sketch very briefly the evolution of the ruff by means of introduction: primordial ruffs and cuffs appear in the early sixteenth century, as very modest white strips. Sometimes they were pleated to render them elastic and thus more comfortable, sometimes decorated with open work and small round stitches at the seams, so-called *poincts* or *perles* that would later evolve into lace.⁷ In an almost biological pattern of evolution, the modest *smockwerk* of tiny pleats and *perles* gradually unfolded into enormous fans and screens during the second half of the sixteenth century. To elaborate on van Mander's metaphor: they assume the shape of unrolling leaves, unfurl like ferns or mimic the gilled underside of a mushroom.⁸ Around 1600, the bizarre fruiting bodies defy gravity, shored up by technical innovations like starch and the *portefraes*, a metal wire structure that buttressed the expanding collars. Starch and metal supports created possibilities for expansion, while lace provided the means for endless variation. During the first half of the seventeenth century, and especially from about 1625 onwards, ruffs flag, wane and wither under the influence of the flamboyant French fashion that ousted the rigid Spanish style. By 1650, they have disintegrated into gossamer cobwebs. As the neckline for ladies lowers, the décolleté is born. Men's ruffs shrivel into the *cravat*, predecessor of the tie. All mushrooms and plants thrive on an underground network, be it a mycelium or a root system. Ruffs and cuffs are obviously products of culture, not of nature, yet they are fed by an equally invisible network of ideas about status, body, hygiene, manners and gender that supports them on a more fundamental level than starch and metal supports.⁹

⁶ Du Mortier B.M. – Wardle P., "De 'bekenden kraag van Reticella kant' in het Rijksmuseum", *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 48 (2000) 93–109.

⁷ For detailed studies: Levey S.M., *Lace. A History* (London: 1983); Bruggeman M., *Kant in Europa. Een historisch overzicht van het ontstaan van de kant tot aan het interbellum* (Bruges: 1997); Henwood S., "La dentelle comme parure. Quelques elements de costume en dentelle du XVI^e au XVII^e siècle", *En Dentelle... Codes & Modes* (Calais: 2005) 49–55; Stang M. (ed.), *Um Kopf und Kragen – Spitze tragen* (Geilenkirchen: 2002); Arnold J. – Tiramani J. – Levey S.M. (eds.), *The Cut and Construction of Linen Shirts, Smocks, Neckwear and Accessories for Men and Women c1540–1660*, *Patterns of Fashion* 4 (London: 2008).

⁸ Daniel Roche quotes Darwin's son: 'The law of progress holds good in dress, and forms blend into one another with almost complete continuity. In both cases a form yields to a succeeding form which is better adapted to the then surrounding conditions', Roche D., *A History of Everyday Things. The Birth of Consumption in France 1600–1800* (Cambridge: 2000) 193.

⁹ Although he does not seem to have been interested much in ruffs, the work of cultural historian Daniel Roche remains exemplary for a broader approach to costume history.

A Consuming Fashion: Conspicuous Consumption and Satire

Peter Burke noted the curious omission of the ruff from Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, the seminal 1899 book in which Veblen coined the term 'conspicuous consumption'.¹⁰ Contemporary sociological jargon such as *blue-collar worker*, *white-collar worker*, *white-collar criminal* and the recently coined *green-collar worker* proves that neckwear still distinguishes social groups from one another, even if in a rather emblematic way. This was no different in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the garment was not only much larger, it was also far more expressive. As an instance of conspicuous consumption it was practically unmatched: the production of ruffs was very labour-intensive and often required yards and yards of the finest linen available. The *fraise à confusion* shown here is made up of no less than seventeen and a half meters of fabric to span a neckband of just thirty-seven and a half centimetres [Fig. 1]. Maintenance and cleaning were left to servants and highly specialized workers, who used buttermilk for cleaning and flour for starching, a practice that was ineffectively forbidden by sumptuary legislation in 1565 since it robbed 'good food for them and their children' from the 'common man and the poor folk'.¹¹ Whoever wore an expansive ruff and precious cuffs effectively expressed exemption from physical labour. Thus ruffs were clearly tokens of leisure.

Abraham Bosse's etching *La galerie du Palais* shows fashionable shoppers strolling past stalls in leisurely manner, looking for *le dernier cri* [Fig. 2]. In the upper right hand corner lace cuffs and collars are on display. Satirical prints on fashion from around 1600 illustrate how pride in leisure was regarded as vain and sinful.¹² In these prints, Bosse's acquisitive fops are

Roche D., *La culture des apparences. Une histoire du vêtement (XVII–XVIII^e siècles)* (Paris: 1991). For the English-speaking world Aileen Ribeiro's work is essential: Ribeiro A., *Dress and Morality* (Oxford – New York: 2003 [1986]); Ribeiro A., *Fashion and Fiction. Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (New Haven – London: 2005).

¹⁰ Burke P., *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy. Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge: 1987) 140.

¹¹ 'goet voetssele voor hen ende haere kinderen' – 'ghemeenē man ende schamele luyden' *Derden placcaet-boeck van Vlaenderen, inhoudende de placcaeten, ordonnancien, reglementen, tractaeten, aliancien* [...], *Placcaeten van Vlaenderen* 3, 2 vols. (Ghent, heirs of Jan vanden Kerchove: 1685) 960. For later legislation that addresses ruffs at length: *Placcaet Des Grootmachtichste Coninckx van Spaengien Don Philips de IV* (Amsterdam, Joris Veseler: 1632) 26–27. See also: Anderson R.M., "The Golilla. A Spanish Collar of the 17th Century", *Waffen- und Kostümkunde* 11,1 (1969) 1–19.

¹² Luijten G., "Frills and Furbelows. Satires on Fashion and Pride around 1600", *Simiolus* 24 (1996) 140–161.



Fig. 1. Pleated ruff, type *fraise à confusion* (ca. 1615–1635). Cambric linen, neck-band: 3.5 × 37.5 cm, outer edge: 17.49 m. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (BK-NM-13112). Image © Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 2. Abraham Bosse, *La Galerie du Palais* (ca. 1637–1640). Etching, 25.1 × 31.8 cm. London, British Museum (1927, 1008.136). Image © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 3. Unknown artist after Marten de Vos, *The Pride of Women: Ruffs* (ca. 1590). Engraving, 20.2 × 28.5 cm. Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium (S.II 85923). Image © Royal Library of Belgium.

warned that they will soon utter their own *dernier cri*. The prints show ironing rods being heated for torture, pieces of excrement and skulls draped in ruffs, monkeys setting and wearing ruffs and even babies with horrible deformities shaped like lace hats, ruffs and cuffs.¹³ Such prints, their accompanying inscriptions, and related texts make it very clear that earthly pride will have hellish consequences in the afterlife [Fig. 3]. Such moralizing references to ruffs are particularly numerous in prints, a medium that lends itself well to social satire [Fig. 4]. Illustrations from moralizing books and the occasional title page also feature ruffs.¹⁴ Less pronounced criticism can be found in painted genre and vanitas scenes by David Teniers the Younger and Adriaen van de Venne.¹⁵

¹³ Idem; Vincent S., *Dressing the Elite. Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford – New York: 2003) 129–130.

¹⁴ Burgundia Antonius, *Des wereltds proef-steen ofte De ydelheydt door de waerheyd beschuldight ende overtuight van valscheydt* (Antwerp, widow and heirs of Jan Cnobbaert: 1643) 336; Borcht Willem van der, *Spiegel der eyghen-kennisse, Bestaende in te-saem ghebonde mal ende treur-dichten in gheknoopt het conterfeytsel des wereltds* (Brussels, Lambert de Griek: 1643) title page.

¹⁵ Klinge M., *David Teniers de Jonge. Schilderijen. Tekeningen* (Antwerp: 1991) 32–33.



Fig. 4. Pieter van der Borch, *Monkeys washing, starching and setting ruffs* (ca. 1562). Engraving, 21 × 28.1 cm. Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium (S.I 7120). Image © Royal Library.

A unique example of a painted sermon on a monumental scale is the 1596 triptych with the fountain of life by Lucas Horenbaut the Younger [Fig. 5]. The lower right hand side of the central panel shows an altar turned into a market stall. The treacherous beauty doing business here is half woman, half demon. She can be identified as 'Vrouw Wereld' or Lady World, the explicitly gendered personification of pride, vanity and dissimulation. The inscription on the stall 'Compt al by en coopt my' or 'Gather round and buy me' implies that she herself is for sale too, for the mere price of a soul.¹⁶ She wears a bulky ruff and is dressed in brilliant carmine.¹⁷ Her ringed left claw rests on a second ruff, the sacrilegious host in a satanic mass.

¹⁶ Alluding to *Matthew* 11:28–30. 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light'.

¹⁷ The use of which was also prohibited in sumptuary legislation throughout the sixteenth century.



Fig. 5. Lucas Horenbaut the Younger, *The Fountain of Life* (1596), detail (bottom right-hand corner of the central panel). Oil on panel, 225 × 126 cm. Ghent, Church of the small beguinage Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ter Hoyen. Photograph by the author.

The liturgical vessels have been replaced by a gold tazza, pomanders and jewellery. The *arma antichristi* of this perverted mass of Saint Gregory are phials of perfume, colourful boxes of make-up, a facial mask and the writings of Mahomet, Calvin, Luther and Menno. Several devils wearing ruffs and holding mirrors hover above the crowd. The ruff is presented here as a threat to the main catholic sacrament of Eucharist itself, the *ostensio* of the mortal body as completely irreconcilable with the *ostensio* of the holy wafer and the miracle of transubstantiation. Whether Horenbaut's panel effectively established a dress code for church-goers in the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ter Hoyen remains an open question. But whoever took communion there wearing a ruff was indeed burdened with the proverbial millstone.



Fig. 6. Cornelis de Vos, *Family Portrait* (ca. 1630–1632). Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 202.5 cm. Ghent, Museum of Fine Arts (1959–A). Image © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW.

It is not remarkable in itself that criticism of ruffs and fancy collars abounded given that fashion has always been a rewarding subject for satirists.¹⁸ What is truly remarkable is how ineffective both satire and legislation were.¹⁹ Sitters for portraits seem blissfully unaware of it, proudly and unashamedly posing while wearing what is elsewhere described and depicted as the devil's attire. A random family portrait by Cornelis de Vos illustrates how all-important collars and cuffs were for the image of the seventeenth-century *burgher* [Fig. 6]. When we confront the ca. 1630–1632

¹⁸ Rasche A. – Wolter G., *Ridikül! Mode in der Karikatur 1600 bis 1900* (Berlin: 2003).

¹⁹ Montaigne had already commented on the counterproductive nature of sumptuary legislation: 'La façon de quoi nos lois essayent à régler les folles et vaines dépenses des tables et vêtements semble être contraire à sa fin. Le vrai moyen, ce serait d'engendrer aux hommes le mépris de l'or et de la soie, comme de choses vaines et inutiles; et nous leur augmentons l'honneur et le prix, qui est une bien inepte façon pour en dégoûter les hommes; car dire ainsi qu'il n'y aura que les princes qui mangent du turbot et qui puissent porter du velours et de la tresse d'or, et l'interdire au peuple, qu'est-ce autre chose que mettre en crédit ces choses-là, et faire croître l'envie à chacun d'en user?', Montaigne Michel de, *Essais*, ed. P. Michel, 3 vols. (Paris: 1973) 381.

portrait with excerpts from Michiel de Swaen's 1688 farce *De gecroonde leersse*, it becomes clear that some sixty years on, ruffs had turned into an archaic and ridiculous element of an outmoded style.²⁰ De Swaen mocks a father who insists his ruff needs to be well starched, ironed and set for the festivities of Shrove Tuesday and a mother who prides herself in the fine linen her daughter is wearing. One of two suitors for the daughter's hand tells his rival: 'Future bride of mine? You're lying: she loves you more dearly than she does her best ruff'. The rival replies: 'Could it be? Could she love me that much?'²¹ The tone is satirical but light-hearted, in contrast to the often vitriolic comments made by contemporaries of the sitters on de Vos' painting, who go as far as to claim that ruffs and cuffs prevent people from praying properly.²² So how can we explain the resilience of the fragile ruff in the face of all this criticism?

Status and Standing

In a recent study on the meaning of dress in Rembrandt's paintings Marieke de Winkel states:

All in all, it seems unlikely that accessories such as gloves, handkerchiefs, and fans in Rembrandt's portraits are anything more than status symbols. It appears that most of these supposedly 'meaningful' attributes seem to convey nothing more than a fairly simple message and served merely as tokens of wealth and signs of fashionableness.²³

Her conclusions might be true where they concern gloves, handkerchiefs, and fans, yet the success of ruffs is not sufficiently explained by the simple motivation of status display. Surely there is no clear-cut meaning to a ruff, no obvious relationship of *signifiant* to *signifié*, no hidden yet straightforward symbolism to uncover. Assessing the meaning of the ruff in a balanced way is difficult since the armies of satirists and the vehemence of their criticism are nowhere challenged by proponents articulating positive reasons for wearing one. A first key to understanding the obstinate tenacity of the ruff in the face of criticism is its function as an orthopaedic device: it acts on the body, raises the chin, straightens the neck and pushes

²⁰ Swaen M. de, *De gecroonde leersse* [1688], ed. J. Smeyers (Brussels: 1989).

²¹ 'Aenstaende bruyt van mijn? Gij jockt, sij mint u meer dan haere beste kragen' – 'Is't meuglijk! Sou se mij soo groote liefde dragen?', de Swaen, *De gecroonde leersse* 49.

²² Van der Borch, *Spiegel der eyghen-kennis* 80.

²³ Winkel de, *Fashion and Fancy* 90.

the head upwards, thus assuring a dignified posture. Historical anthropologist Herman Roodenburg illustrates the importance of good posture in seventeenth-century culture by referring to a relevant case study, that of the crooked neck of the young Constantijn Huygens junior.²⁴ Upon discovering the defect, his parents immediately took action by equipping him with a stiff collar and attaching ribbons to his cap, but apparently to no avail, since eventually a surgeon had to be hired to remedy the situation. In 1696, the Antwerp burgher's wife Anna Maria de Neuf ordered an 'iron cross clothed with black velvet to teach my daughter to stand up straight'.²⁵ The approach was clearly that of the iron fist in the velvet glove. In this context it is worth quoting Paul Connerton's work on bodily memory at length:

Patterns of body use become ingrained through our interactions with objects. There are the apparently automatic, long familiar movements of artisans, the way a carpenter wields a plane and the weaver uses a loom, so habitual that, if asked, they would say that they had a feeling of the proper management of the implement in their hands; there are the ways that working at a machine or desk imposes and reinforces a set of postural behaviours which we come to regard as 'belonging' to the factory worker or the sedentary white-collar worker. Postures and movements which are habit memories become sedimented into bodily conformation.²⁶

The ruff just as much functions as a mould that subtly presses its bearer to comply with the standard. In Bredero's *Spaanschen Brabander* (1617) the supposed nobleman Jerolimo orders his valet Robbeknol to set his ruff:

Jerolimo: Does this ruff fit me?
And does it suit me well?
Robbeknol: Squire what askest thou me,
How could your stuff not show a nice, pleasant and perfect fit
From childhood on your mother, has grown your body into it.²⁷

²⁴ Roodenburg H., "Over scheefhalzen en zwellende heupen. Enige argumenten voor een historische antropologie van de zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst", *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 9,2 (1993) 151–168.

²⁵ 'eijseren cruijs bekleedt met swert frawiel om leeren recht te houden mijn dochter', Sorber F., "Kledij in Antwerpse archieven uit de zeventiende eeuw", in: *Antwerpen in de XVIIde eeuw* (Antwerp: 1989) 466.

²⁶ Connerton P., *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: 1989) 94.

²⁷ Jerolimo: 'Hoe past my dese kraach? En staetse my al wel?' Robbeknol: 'Joncker is dat een vraegh, En sou jou goet niet fray, niet wel en aerdich passen, Jou moer hetter jou lijf, van jonckx na laten wassen', Bredero Gerbrandt A., *Spaanschen Brabander*, ed. C.F.P. Stutterheim (Culemborg: 1974) 195.

The ruff is thus closely tied to ideals of posture that were applied from very early on in life.²⁸ The garment withstands criticism because it is no mere passive sign of status but an agent in the formation of social standing. Moreover the ruff also guides the use of the body during all kinds of activities, creating a well-defined personal space and determining the distance to be observed during conversation. Dining with a full-blown set ruff was no picnic. It was said of Marguerite de Valois that she had to send a servant in search of a two-foot spoon during a banquet.²⁹ The anecdote may well be apocryphal but it brilliantly points out that the head of state was enmeshed in protocol that enforced a gymnastic use of cutlery. Her ruff undoubtedly was a status-symbol, an instrument of power and a token of distinction; yet at the same time it was a straitjacket that mercilessly put on show her command of the art of dining. Friar Adriaen Poirters, the Flemish moralist *par excellence*, mocked a swaggerer who walked the streets wielding a toothpick while claiming to have partridge bones stuck between his teeth, for a splodge of porridge on his ruff betrayed his actual diet.³⁰

Purity and Danger

The imposition of coercive conventions, strict impulse control and hygienic norms is central to the 'civilizing process' as described by Norbert Elias. Dress – and especially clean dress – plays a crucial part in this process. Cleaning and maintaining white fabrics was very labour intensive; linen was bleached in urine, rinsed in sour milk and kept moist on sun-drenched bleaching fields. Alessandro Allori's painted ceiling for the ladies' quarters in the Palazzo Pitti presents a highly sweetened vision of the mundane task of doing laundry: ruffs and other washing are hung to dry amid a flock of fluttering birds while pretty maids shampoo their

²⁸ Vigarello G., *Le corps redressé. Histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique* (Paris: 1978); idem, "The Upward Training of the Body from the Age of Chivalry to Courtly Civility", in Feher M. – Naddaf R. – Tazi N. (eds.), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body 2* (New York: 1989) 148–199; Roodenburg H., *The Eloquence of the Body. Perspectives on Gesture in the Dutch Republic* (Zwolle: 2004) 77–111.

²⁹ Bruggeman M., "De Familie de Medici en de kant ten tijde van twee Franse koninginnen. Catharina en Maria de Medici", *Kant* 29,2 (2006) 5–7.

³⁰ Poirters Adriaen, *Het masker van de wereldt afgetrocken, Vermeerdert, verbeteret* (Antwerp, widow and heirs of Jan Cnobbaert: 1649) 250.



Fig 7. Joos de Momper and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Flemish market and washing place* (ca. 1620). Oil on canvas, 166 × 194 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado (P01443). Image © Museo Nacional del Prado.

own hair and that of their mistresses' lapdogs.³¹ Painters from the Low Countries are generally less prone to euphemism, as shown by Jacob van Ruisdael's distant bleaching fields near Haarlem and Joos de Momper's more anecdotal views of the village washing place [Fig. 7]. Constantijn Huygens describes a collective mania for cleanliness:

There wool must drown,
There silk must soak, there linen stink
(They argue still over the matter which one of them is fairest)
Either of yellow starch, or off the blue slop.³²

³¹ Arnold – Tirimani – Levey, *The Cut and Construction of Linen Shirts* 16.

³² 'Daer moet de woll verdrincken, Daer moet de zijd' in 'tsop, daer moet het lijnwaet stincken, (Men pleyt noch op 't geschil welck schoonst te noemen zij), Off nae de gheelen rijs, off nae den blauwen brij', Huygens Constantijn, *Kerkuraia Mastix. Dat is't Costelijck Mall* (Jan Pietersz. vande Venne: 1622) lines 205–208.

According to some authors clean linen was conducive to a good humoral balance and to health in general.³³ Conversely, dirty linen was a threat to health, both in a physical and in a moral sense. Adriaen Poirters identifies 'the yellowness of linen' as an indicator of wickedness, while spotless white linen shows innocence.³⁴ Nicolaas Heinsius still shares this opinion in his 1695 *Den Vermakehycken Avanturier* or 'The Amusing Adventurer', where he presents a messy marquis who is less well-mannered than Marguerite de Valois: 'His cuffs or hand-ruffs were two inches longer than his fingers, so as to lick the fat of every mouthful that he ate before he did, thus causing heartache to his laundress, whom it cost an extra pound of soap and the skin of her hands if she desired them to be white'.³⁵ The showiness and wastefulness of the marquis stand in stark contrast to the diligent industry of his poor servant. Friar Poirters preaches the middle path, lashing out against yellowness as well as against excessive washing and cleaning: 'But what do you think of a lady, who recently spent fifty *pattakons* to wash, starch and set a ruff? In my opinion, she, and lots more like her, would have spent their money better in buying cloth to cover their impudent nudity'.³⁶

Like radiant halos, ruffs and cuffs framed those parts of the body that were perceived to be least contaminated by the threat of bodily urges; they marked the liminal zones that separate public from private, social from intimate, bare from covered up, presentable from taboo. Right after birth, these borderlines were sharply guarded. The body of the newborn baby was still essentially animal-like and had to be shaped by tight swaddling in linen bands to make the transition from nature to culture.³⁷ Once the impure child had been domesticated, it was kept on a leash. Such leading strings remained part of the child's dress even when direct

³³ Vigarello G., *Le sain et le malsain. Santé et mieux-être depuis le moyen âge* (Paris: 1993) 103–106.

³⁴ Poirters, *Het masker van de wereldt afgetrocken* 3.

³⁵ 'Syn manchettes ofte hand – lubben waren twee duimbreed langer, als syn vingers, om also met goed gevoeg het vet van ieder mond vol, die hy at, voor hem te likken, tot hardseer van syn Waster, die het een pond seep meer, en het vel van haar handen kosten, indien sy deselve wit begeerde te hebben', Heinsius Nicolaas, *Den vermakehycken avanturier* [1695] (Amsterdam, Antoni Schoonenburg: 1722) 60.

³⁶ 'Maer wat dunckt u van een Me-vrouwe, die laestmael noch vijftigh pattakons gegeven heeft om eenen kraegh te doen wasschen, stijven, ende setten? My dunckt dat sy, en veel met haer, voor dat gheldt wel netter doeck soude ghekocht hebben, om haere onbeschaemde naecktheydt daer mede te bedecken', Poirters, *Het masker van de wereldt afgetrocken* 104.

³⁷ Maier-Metz F., "Die psychologische Bedeutung des Wickelkindes", in Hirsch S. (ed.), *Dem Leben verbunden... Fatschenkinder. Vorträge der Tagung "Dem Leben verbunden"* (Benediktbeuern: 2005) 49–55.

parental control was no longer necessary. During the symbolic rebirth of a rite of passage, the cord was finally cut.³⁸ Ruffs can be seen as a remnant or as a continuation of this process of dressage and discipline, creating immaculate zones that restrain the dangerous body. The rise and fall of the ruff is closely interwoven with sweeping changes in body-culture. The small edge of *smockwerk* that originated around the neckline of shirts was initially functional, since its elasticity heightened comfort. Because of the inflation inherent in all status symbols it literally started to inflate to such an extent as to become a wholly separate piece of clothing, forming a textile cartwheel between head and body. The ethics and etiquette of impulse control created an ideal climate for the steady growth of this symbolic rim of purity.

The connotations surrounding the ruff are complex and ambiguous. On the one hand a clean ruff indicates self-control and regulates civilized interaction, on the other hand it is a sign of vanity and wastefulness. On the one hand it partitions the body, on the other hand the border it establishes is clearly a liminal zone, gauzy and transparent. On the one hand it establishes borders between social classes, on the other hand these borders allow for manipulation, appropriation and parody. Satirical prints and literature target fictional ruff-wearers. In grim reality it was the setters of ruffs who fell victim to these incendiary contradictions. On 15 November 1615 the famous yellow-starcher Anne Turner swung from the gallows in London, ruff and all.³⁹ On 28 November 1603 the widow and beggar Cathelijne Tancre was burnt at the stake as a witch. The verdict mentions that she tried to make a living by bleaching ruffs and caps in her garden.⁴⁰ She was executed in Ghent and we can only wonder if she, or her judges, ever laid eyes on Lucas Horenbaut's 1596 *Fountain of Life* in the church of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ter Hoyen.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The British psychoanalyst John Carl Flügel briefly mentions the ruff in his influential book *The Psychology of Clothes* where he describes ring-shaped clothing. Interestingly, he does so in a cross-cultural context:

³⁸ Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction* 112.

³⁹ Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* 75–77.

⁴⁰ Monballyu J., "Geexecuteert metten viere" omwille van hekserij in het graafschap Vlaanderen 1600–1624 (Courtray: 2001) 23.

The most extravagant forms of ring decoration are probably those which are placed around the neck. Many primitive peoples have worn ring decorations that, in magnitude or grotesqueness, utterly eclipse even the great ruffs worn by our Elizabethan ancestors.⁴¹

The opposite page in his book shows two Karen women forced to pose on either side of a male colonial officer. Flügel describes them as 'sufferers from a mistaken idea of beauty':

[...] the two ladies from Burmah [...] have affected a style of dress and ornamentation which, judged by our present-day standard (all standards, we shall do well to remember, are subjective), must surely approximate to the high-water mark both of discomfort and ugliness. Their heads peep out, as it seems most painfully, from over the top of their great mass of collars; indeed they appear to have most successfully emulated the giraffe in their endeavour to wear as many rings as possible.⁴²

Though Flügel states that all standards are subjective, his tone suggests that he unconsciously hummed *Britannia rule the waves* while writing. That the western ruff is utterly eclipsed by so-called primitive neck ornaments is no longer so obvious at all.

The rings around Karen necks may effectively push down the rib-cage; the ruffs worn by the Infanta Isabella on state portraits are equally effective in creating a comparable optical effect [Fig. 8]. Copies by lesser artists sometimes exaggerate the effect to such an extent as to make the Archduchess look as if she too is trying to emulate a giraffe. On pendant portraits Archduke Albert invariably wears a ruff of smaller proportions [Fig. 9]. The examples of this gender-based differentiation are numerous and they are apparent in many other cultures as well. Since Flügel's day, anthropologists have convincingly argued that so-called primitive adornments can communicate complex cultural codes in very eloquent ways.⁴³ For a woman from the Samburu people in northern Kenya, neck ornamentation plays a crucial role in social life, since she is literally incorporated into society by proclaiming her status (in the broadest sense of the word) to that society. The mass of beaded necklaces, supported by a wooden structure resembling the *portefraes* has been described as 'a graphic autobiography by which she can accurately recall and retell the

⁴¹ Flügel J.C., *The Psychology of Clothes* [1930] (New York: 1971) 50.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Turner T., "The Social Skin", in Cherfas J. (ed.), *Not Work Alone. A Cross-Cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival* (London: 1980) 112–140.



Fig. 8. Workshop of Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia* (ca. 1615). Oil on canvas, 113.5 × 175.8 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado (Poi684). Image © Museo Nacional del Prado.



Fig. 9. Workshop of Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Archduke Albert of Austria* (ca. 1615). Oil on canvas, 113.5 × 177.5 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado (Poi683). Image © Museo Nacional del Prado.

events of her life'.⁴⁴ In Namibia, Himba children receive a first necklace during the Otjingongo naming ritual.⁴⁵ The connection between rites of passage and bodily adornment is a cross-cultural constant, and in the early modern Low Countries, too, changes in social status are accompanied by changes in dress.

On the occasion of the Deventer marriage of Jan Cornelisz. Van Wou and Henrica Verwers on 14 May 1627, pastor-poet Jacobus Revius declaimed a wedding poem. In this excerpt he addresses the bride:

The female head bows deep under his custody
 There it soon has enough of pleats and frippery
 Make sure to listen to the Lord's laws attentively
 No nobler ornament for your ears do I see
 His yoke around your neck will win you better praise
 Then a conceited ruff of sensuous fabric made.⁴⁶

Revius deemed it unnecessary to advise the groom with regard to his clothing. His patriarchal speech is primarily focused on Henrica, who is told that her wedded status demands a sober style. Male authors' criticism from across the denominational spectrum and from both the Northern Republic and the Southern Netherlands is nearly always directed at women. I have not been able to discover a single instance where a female author addresses the issue. In a few rare cases male authors do address men, but when they do, it is precisely because their attention for apparel is deemed effeminate. In a 1614 poem inspired by Theodore Beza, Pieter Roemer Visscher derides a 'pretty mannekin with his blond hair, whose ruff is always so well set', and at whose wedding ceremony the priest had to ask the congregation 'Which one of these two is the bride?'⁴⁷ Willem van der Borch states that the men of his time are more interested in fashion fads and novel ways of setting a ruff than in practising masculine virtues and

⁴⁴ Cole H., "Living Art Among the Samburu", in Cordwell J. – Schwarz R. (eds.), *The Fabrics of Culture. The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* (The Hague: 1979) 87–102.

⁴⁵ Wolputte S. Van, *Material Culture in Himbaland, Northern Namibia* (Tervuren: 2003) 91–92, 249–262.

⁴⁶ 'Het vrouwelijcke hooft buyght onder zijn voogdij So heeftet haest genoeg van tooyen-ploery' Schickt u aendachtelijck des Heeren wet te horen, Geen edeler behanck en weet ick voor u oren. Zijn jock aen uwen hals geeft vry een meerder lof Als een verweende craech vant sinnelijckste stof. Revius Jacobus, *Over-Ysselsche sangen en dichten*, ed. W.A.P. Smit, vol. II (Amsterdam: 1935) 51–52. Revius' speech is inspired by 1 Peter 2,3, and the yoke reference can again be traced back to *Matthew* 11: 28–30.

⁴⁷ 'Dat Moye mannetgen met zijn geele haer, Wiens lubbekens altijt staen effen int ront' – 'Welck van dese twee is hier nu de Bruyt?', Laan N. van der, *Uit Roemer Visscher's Brabbeling*, vol. I (Utrecht: 1918) 36.

protecting the fatherland.⁴⁸ Van der Borcht is baffled by the vagaries of fashion:

But, oh Lord! What strange contraption
Has the perfume seller put on now?
Is't the arm, or is't the ankle,
One is loose, the other stiff,
One confined to the extreme
The other way too free and wide
Here it billows there it pinches
[...]
Why the upper part tied in
And the lower part so broad
Does it all have any meaning:
Should I fabricate a reason?⁴⁹

Patterns in Presentation and Representation

When discussing the wide skirts of the sixteenth century that were supported by farthingales (wijven-speck or 'ladies-lard' in Flemish), the French cultural historian Georges Vigarello noted that they basically divide the body: 'Le "bas" demeure d'abord support, socle quasi immobile du "haut"', thus answering Van der Borcht's question.⁵⁰ Translating Vigarello's sculptural metaphor into the pictorial medium of portraiture, the ruff can be equated with the frame. Portraits tend to give pre-eminence to the face and the hands, the very parts that are isolated by ruffs and cuffs. The visual strategy of favouring the front and upper part is apparent in both the presentation of the body as mediated through dress and in its representation in painting. It appears that the coinciding rise in popularity of ruffs and portraits is no mere coincidence. As framing devices, both dress and portrait express the same underlying ideas, both being symptoms whose root cause is the same culture of bodiliness. Nor is it a coincidence that ruffs and portraits were criticized for more or less the same reasons. Their

⁴⁸ Van der Borcht, *Spiegel der eyghen-kennisse* 11.

⁴⁹ 'Maer ô Heer! Wat vreemden winckel, Heeft de Snuf-vrouw om haer lijf? Is 't den arm, oft is 't den schinckel, 't Een is los, en 't ander stijf, 't Een ten uysterste benepen, 't Ander al te vry en ruym, Dit ghesoent en dat benepen, [...] Waer toe 't boven-deel ghebonden, En het onderst' wijdt en ruym? Wil ick dat bediedt door-gronden; Wil ick't suyghen uyt den duym?', van der Borcht, *Spiegel der eyghen-kennisse* 77–78.

⁵⁰ Vigarello G., *Histoire de la beauté. Le corps et l'art d'embellir de la Renaissance à nos jours* (Paris: 2004) 20–21.

conspicuous cost was denounced, as was the vain attempt to glorify the body through its presentation and representation. We can also observe that the gender specific degrees of constraint are observed both in ruffs and in portraiture, with women being subject to a more severe restriction of bodily freedom in both cases.

A good case in point is the ensemble of three portraits painted by Jacob Jordaens for the Antwerp merchant and almoner Rogier Le Witer [Figs. 10–12].⁵¹ The paintings show Rogier himself, his wife Catharina Behaghel and his mother Magdalena de Cuyper. Rogier is shown standing up, casually leaning his right elbow on a chair. He is wearing simple, single cuffs and a falling band edged with lace whose outline extends into the medalion-like patch of blue sky that sets off his head. His wife is shown in a more passive seated pose, wearing a set of double cuffs and an impressive set ruff. No open sky is to be seen behind her; she is firmly and massively occupying a more confined, domestic space. The widowed Magdalena is also shown seated, wearing single cuffs and a much smaller set ruff. While her daughter-in-law's outfit is made of a conspicuously expensive fabric and is bedecked in jewellery, the widow wears more modest clothing, the fur and the pearls on her handkerchief underlining the simplicity of her dress. Behind her a smaller patch of open sky is visible. It is possible that the differing backgrounds had a role to play in the original presentation of the portraits, but they also reflect the relative social freedom enjoyed by the sitters. The three portraits illustrate how the conventions of dress, epitomized in the ruffs, and those of portraiture, apparent in pose and setting, mutually reinforce one another.

Conclusion

Apart from being practical tools for art historians in dating and attributing portraits, painted ruffs are interesting objects for a broader social and cultural study of seventeenth-century society. The iconological archetype of the severed head is indeed fundamental to the genre of portraiture. The portrait, however, is a highly self-conscious, one-sidedly visual and consequently distanced and essentially intellectual manifestation of this

⁵¹ Bikker J. – Filedt Kok J.P. – van de Laar M. – de Ridder W., “Drie portretten van Antwerpse burgers geschilderd door Jacob Jordaens”, *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 51 (2003) 234–273.



Fig. 10. Jacob Jordaens, *Portrait of Rogier Le Witer* (1623). Oil on canvas, 152 × 118.4 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (SK-A-4971). Image © Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 11. Jacob Jordaens, *Portrait of Catharina Behaghel* (1635). Oil on canvas, 152 × 118 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (SK-A-4972). Image © Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 12. Jacob Jordaens, *Portrait of Magdalena de Cuyper* (ca. 1640). Oil on canvas, 152 × 118 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (SK-A-4973). Image © Rijksmuseum.

archetype. The ruff, on the other hand, not only visualizes the archetype of the severed head; it truly and paradoxically embodies it by dividing and ruling living, breathing bodies. Ruffs are not mere passive tokens of status but active formers of standing that are closely interwoven with ideas about purity, danger, and gender. They mark borders between social classes and borders on the body in a porous and highly ambiguous way. They illuminate the complex relationship between the presentation of the body and its representation, exemplifying the stranglehold that the idea of the severed head held not just on human imagery but on human bodies themselves. They stress the supremacy of the head and the face over the body, yet the opposition is never entirely binary. The boundary is not a clear demarcation line but a fuzzy, shifting, liminal zone. We can never be quite sure if the ruff divides or unites, sets apart or binds together. Lace itself has been described as an 'abstract text on unattainable relationships, for which there are no words or images available'; its layered and fine-meshed aesthetic amazes, stuns and fascinates.⁵² It does not allow for the triumphant disclosure of iconographic programmes but ultimately prompts silent modesty.

These were words to clothe a naked thing, and the thing is ridiculous in clothes.

John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 1933

⁵² Vandenbroeck P. et al., *The Fascinating Faces of Flanders. Through Art and Society* (Antwerp: 1998) 319.

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‘AND I BEAR YOUR BEAUTIFUL FACE PAINTED ON MY CHEST’.
THE LONGEVITY OF THE HEART AS THE PRIMAL ORGAN
IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES AND RENAISSANCE

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In one of his *Canzonieri*, Petrarch maintains that the lovely smiling face of his beloved Laura had been painted on his breast. As a result he always carried her with him: ‘Ma ’l bel viso leggiadro che depinto/porto nel petto’ (*Canzoniere* XCVII).¹ With this reflection the poet alludes to the quality of the heart as a container of personal records, the organ upon which the memories of the beloved are stamped. The imagery is clearly derived from troubadour poetry, where lovers bore the face of the recipient of their adoration emblazoned on their chests. Even more common and stemming from Antiquity are Medusa heads painted or engraved on military cuirasses in order to petrify enemies.²

These representations – designed to evoke sweet or horrible emotions – which settle in the area of the thorax, do not reflect medieval ideas on the functioning of the brain that reigned in the field of natural philosophy. Pre-modern scholars often situated mental operations in the head and based on the findings of Aristotle, Galen and Herophilus devised brain diagrams of the physiological process that purportedly took place in the ‘cerebral ventricles’. Medieval and Renaissance illustrations such as a reproduction from a 1513 edition of Aristotle’s *Parvula philosophiae naturalis* [Fig. 1] – widely read in the sixteenth century – confirmed the threefold division of the intellectual process: fantasy and imagination were thought to be localized in the front of the head, cognition and reason in the centre and memory at the back. Usually this arrangement was shown in combination with the well-known *sensus communis*, which received messages sent by the senses and passed them on for interpretation. Most brain diagrams depict the ventricles in a head detached from the body. A significant number of these nevertheless reflect that there was much more at stake concerning the human body, especially for those familiar with the works

¹ Jager E., *Book of the Heart* (Chicago: 2000) 70–71 and 145–147.

² Wilk S.R., *Medusa. Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (Oxford: 2000).

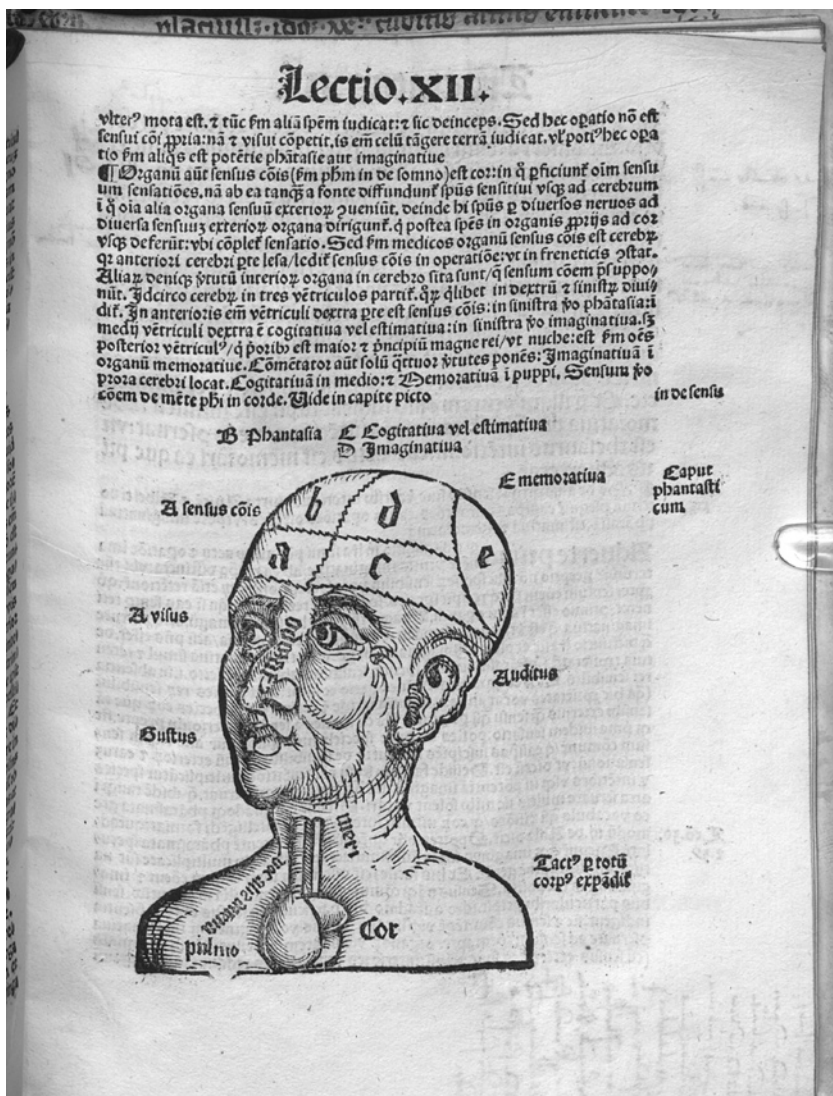


Fig. 1. "Representation of brainfunctions", illustration in Aristotle's *Parvula philosophiae naturalis*, edited by Matthias Qualle (1513). Woodcut. Image © Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.

of Aristotle and Galen. The picture of the *Parvula philosophiae* obviously belongs to the iconographical type of the bust portrait. The simultaneous depiction of the head with the chest housing heart and lungs, the other two 'principal members' of the human body, demonstrates that a head does not suffice for a living person and consequently cannot represent a complete human being.³

These embodiments of the mental faculties, one ensconced in the heart and one in the head, indicate that the establishment of an explicit and unequivocal hierarchy of these two bodily organs is extremely difficult. This is especially the case with respect to these two interconnected issues: which organ operates as the human command centre and where is life to be located? For the time under consideration here, the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, this inevitably leads to the pivotal question: where is the abode of the soul? In the following I will demonstrate through thematic examples from several domains that because of their completely different connotations in the premodern era it is impossible to award the palm of honour to one specific organ.

Shakespeare's 'cri de coeur' in his *Merchant of Venice* (III, ii, 64), 'Tell me where is fancie bread, or in the heart, or in the head', is telling in this respect, not in the least because the lines introduce a characteristic battle of head and heart.⁴ Although the lines are not evidence of extensive medical knowledge, they do document the different connotations the word 'fancy' had around 1600. It might refer to 'imagination', a notion to be found in late medieval Latin and vernacular medical treatises.⁵ The surgical treatise by Lanfranc, for example, which was still very popular at the time, called the brain the proper instrument of imagination, since it interpreted that which sprouted from fantasy. This, however, is probably not what Shakespeare sought to express. Rather, he deliberately toys with the ambiguity of 'fancie', which in addition to 'fantasy' could also suggest 'amorous inclination'. As one aspect of the battle between head and heart,

³ Violéz O'Neil Y., "Diagrams of the Medieval Brain: a Study in Cerebral Localization", in Cassidy B. (ed.), *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton: 1993) 91–105 and Clarke E. – Dewhurst K. – Aminoff M.J., *An Illustrated History of Brain Function. Imaging the Brain from Antiquity* (Oxford: 1996) 19.

⁴ Violéz O'Neil, "Diagrams" and Sudhoff W., "Die Lehre von den Hirnventrikeln in textlicher und graphischer Tradition des Altertums und Mittelalters", *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 7 (1913) 149–205, fig. 9.

⁵ *Lanfranc's Chirurg.* 113 Þat place [þe brayn] is propre instrument of ymaginacioun þe which resceyveþ þinges þat comprehendþ of fantasie [L. *res a phantasia comprehensas*.] *Oxford English Dictionary*, online version, www.oed.com/view/Entry/68025; accessed 26 March 2012.

the lines from the *Merchant of Venice* prefigure Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, and precisely this metaphorical juxtaposition is the most common with respect to the choice of the head or the heart to this day.

The fact that there has not been and probably never will be a complete 'capital' triumph has to do with love and with the metaphorical and symbolic qualities of the heart, which are far more obvious than those concerning the head and brain. An appreciation of this is pertinent to a volume such as this that explores the connotations of (detached) heads in the late medieval and Renaissance periods. Of course, heads also have many symbolic qualities, and in cases such as the *vera icon* and the Mandyllion – both depicting the floating head of Christ, usually on a piece of cloth – a conflation of the actual body of Christ and its representation is involved, a characteristic that we otherwise only find in representations of the heart.⁶ Generally speaking the head/brain and the heart have tended to compete in importance. This article will examine why it took the head so long to win, addressing reciprocal problems such as why we have so many representations of sacred hearts but none of the sacred brain, and why we have so many detached heads that figure as cultic centres of attention but, with the exception of Mandyllion and *vera icon*, no cult of Christ's sacred head. The intersecting lines between various cultic and scholarly foci will be documented. Of course Jacques Le Goff and Scott Manning Stevens have already mapped the use of head and heart metaphors found in medieval and early modern medical, religious and philosophical concepts, and on the whole their sophisticated arguments still stand.⁷ Nevertheless, as neither paid attention to the specific topic of 'detached heads' there is room for fine-tuning in this regard.

This paper will explore the battle of the head and heart in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in many respects periods of transition. This entails explaining in more detail why for religious and philosophical purposes the heart became more popular during a time in which its medical secrets were being slowly but surely revealed. From the seventeenth century onwards, the head was considered the leading organ in each human being; however, a biased reading of William Harvey and

⁶ Belting H., "In Search of Christ's Body. Image or Imprint", in Kessler H.L. – Wolf G. (eds.), *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation* (Bologna: 1998) 1–11.

⁷ Le Goff J., "Head or Heart? The Political Use of Body Metaphors in the Middle Ages", in Feher M. (ed.) *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 3 vols. (New York: 1989) 3: 12–27 and Manning Stevens S., "Sacred Heart and Secular Brain", in Mazzio C. – Hillman D. (eds.), *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: 1997) 63–284.

René Descartes has led to the exaggeration of the direct consequences of the 'Mechanization of the Heart'.⁸ The present concern is to demonstrate that apart from other factors, such as the so-called 'renaissance of Aristotelianism' in the sixteenth century, its quasi-equation to the soul was what made the heart so resistant to downgrading. 'Cardiac saints', namely holy men or women with miraculous heart-trouble, obstructed the cultic triumph of the head far into the eighteenth century, and even then successfully managed to pass on their task to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in which all other heart devotions merged. The cult of the brain appears to be a twentieth and twentieth-first century phenomenon, evolving around geniuses such as Einstein or fanatics such as Ulrike Meinhof.

My discussion of the interrelated factors will begin by examining the strength of the heart in connection with the role of love in Christianity. The metaphorical strengths of each body part will then be explored by juxtaposing the phenomenon of the head relic with that of sacred hearts and the 'cardiomania' of European royals, while practices of decapitation will be compared with executions that included the extraction of hearts. The article concludes with a discussion of Renaissance and Baroque natural philosophical reasoning and medical research which struggled to let go of the heart's physical hegemony for religious reasons.

The Look and Language of Love

Head and heart metaphors both originate in Antiquity but owe their extreme popularity to the Bible and its exegesis.⁹ Each organ plays a leading role in the books of the Bible, with each appearing over a thousand times, but in its role as the site of divine inscription and divine judgment, promoted by St Paul, the heart is well in the lead. Nevertheless, we also frequently encounter the head, which was considered nearest to God, like the precipitous towers of Gothic cathedrals reaching towards heaven. This tropology was reinforced by the fact that in Colossians 2:18–19 Paul declared the head the principle of societal cohesion and growth, and at the same time warns his readers not to lose their heads:

⁸ Fuchs T., *Die Mechanisierung des Herzens. Harvey und Descartes – der vitale und der mechanische Aspekt des Kreislaufs* (Frankfurt am Main: 1992).

⁹ Survey: Le Goff, "Head or Heart", also: Léon-Dufour, X., *Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Munich: 1977) 221.

Let no one rob you of your prize by a voluntary humility and worshipping of the angels, dwelling in the things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding firmly to the Head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows with God's growth.

In its Pauline disguise, however, the metaphorical strengthening of the heart quickly rendered it superior to the head, turning it into the seat of vital forces, including affectivity and interiority; in other words, the origin of life and death.¹⁰ In this the apostle followed Matthew the evangelist, who implored Jesus' followers to love God 'with all your heart', while adding 'with all your soul, and with all your mind'. The believer thus did not need the sensual instruments of the head, its eyes, tongue and ears, as the secrets of God were disclosed to the heart. Henceforth, Christianity propagated the virtually invincible concept of the human being as one of flesh, whose heart (*kardia*) was the rational, emotional and volitional centre – the hidden core of the self.¹¹

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 *Corinthians* 3:2–3)

This interpretation became current due to Augustine, who inextricably linked it with love, an additional reason for its long-lived popularity.

The trope became immensely powerful from the twelfth century onwards, when Christianity increasingly embraced the language of *caritas* or love. Secularized by Petrarch, it developed into a pictorial and literary image still employed by Renaissance poets. Shakespeare also evoked the 'true image' of his beloved still lingering in his 'bosom's shoppe' (*Sonnet* 24).¹² However, the conflation of head and heart in the form of a bust-like portrait of the beloved depicted on or in the thorax of the lover appears to be extremely problematical when considered non-metaphorically. Hearts of saints, such as that of the proto-martyr Ignatius of Antioch, are said to have had the name of Jesus imprinted upon them due to their religious zeal – in other words, the focus of their thought was inscribed on their bodies in letters – but there seem to be no reports of

¹⁰ Le Goff, "Head or Heart" 14–16.

¹¹ Jager, *Book of the Heart* 11 and Brown P., *The Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: 1988).

¹² See: Jager, *Book of the Heart* 146–147.

the visualization of Jesus' head on the bodies of his followers. The case of St Margherita di Città di Castello (1287–1320) most closely approaches an amalgamation of head and heart symbolism. After her demise, it was found that Margherita's heart contained three pearls adorned with the images of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and the meaning of the sentence she had often muttered was finally revealed: 'Oh, se voi sapeste il tesoro che ho nel cuore, vi meravigliereste!' (Ah, if you only knew what treasure I have in my heart, you would be amazed).¹³

Among the 'affected saintly hearts', those which received the *insignia* of Christ's suffering make up a special category. Around 1300, Chiara da Montefalco's (1268–1308) love of Christ was so immense that she offered to help him bear his torment. The Saviour then appeared to the Umbrian nun in a vision and told her that he accepted her proposal.¹⁴ As she took over the burden of the Cross, the elements of the Passion were substantiated in the chamber of her heart. Despite its material dimensions, this seems to be a case of 'sign language'. Following her example, many more saints subsequently received gifts from Jesus in their hearts. In all cases God's message was depicted in marks close to or in the heart, but never fully visualized in an image. These holy men and women participated in Christ's torment, and as proof of this their hearts received 'internal stigmata', which represented the divine touch. The life of Veronica Giuliani (1660–1727) is a late echo of Chiara's experiences and proves the persistence of devotion to the heart alongside the similarly popular early modern cult of 'detached heads'. She tellingly received an impression of Jesus' Crown of Thorns on her head, while the Cross, in combination with the other elements of the Passion, was said to be engraved as an emblem on her heart. This is shown in the graphic depiction which her confessor asked her to sketch on a red paper heart [Fig. 2].¹⁵ Something similar happened to a Roman Baroque cult figure, the Blessed Carlo da Sezze (†1660), whose heart received the stigmata in 1648. As proof of this he bore nail-shaped marks on his chest, which miraculously increased in size after his demise.¹⁶

¹³ Laurent M.-H., "Vita B. Margaritae virginis de Civitate Castellii", *Analecta Bollandiana* 19 (1900) 21–80.

¹⁴ Park K., "The Criminal and the Saintly Body: Autopsy and Dissection in Renaissance Italy", *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994) 1–33.

¹⁵ Salvatori F.M., *Vita della Beata Veronica Giuliani, Badessa delle Cappuccine in S. Chiare di Città di Castello* (Rome: 1803) 115–123.

¹⁶ Sbardella R., "Introduzione", in Carlo da Sezze, *Opera completa* (Rome: 1963), vol. I, 100.

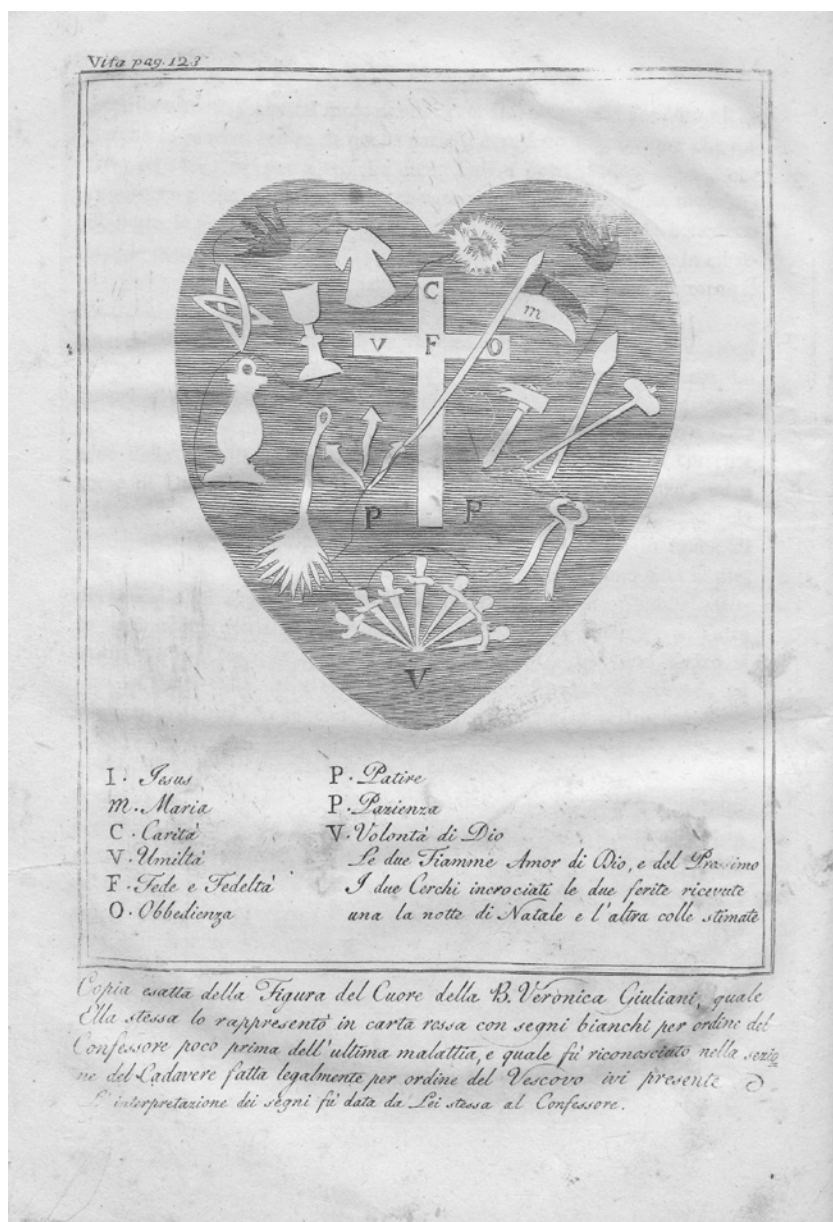


Fig. 2. Sign language in the heart of Beata Veronica Giuliani sketched by herself, illustration in F.M. Salvator's *Vita della Beata Veronica Giuliani* (Rome: 1803), p. 123.

Woodcut. Image © University Library Utrecht.

Cultically venerated heads tend to be severed, separated from their saintly body and thus usually becoming genuine body-part relics. The cephalophores or head-bearing saints figuring prominently in this volume tend to hold their own decapitated heads breast-high, sometimes even cradling them like a baby or resting them against the flesh of their thorax, where their love of Christ found expression. In the case of Jesus himself – for whom of course no physical skull relic was available – there was a need for other forms of transmission of his image, preferably on wood, paper or cloth. For example, rather than becoming apparent on her breast, an effigy of the face of Christ appeared on the veil of a pious woman of Jerusalem who had aided Jesus as he carried his cross to Golgotha. The topic of Christ's floating head became extremely popular in late medieval painting, where innumerable Veronicas can be found holding the *sudarium* with an image of the Man of Sorrows – Christ with the Crown of Thorns. Connected to this, but with different roots, is the story of the Mandylion told by Eusebius of Caesarea, referring to a bare-headed image of Jesus on a square piece of cloth that Jesus himself had sent to Abgar of Edessa in order to cure him.¹⁷

In the ensuing centuries this theme developed into the *vera icon*, a representation of the true face of Christ. Very tellingly, this type of image, which was considered not to be manmade, has no reference to decapitation. By showing only the face, without neck or shoulders, its ethereal character is emphasized. These pictures are not factual incarnations of God in the person of Jesus his Son, but apparitions of his momentary presence on earth. The floating nature of the image dematerialized the detached head of Jesus as much as possible, meaning that both incarnation and contact with the superterrestrial took place via the heart and not the head. Although there is a relationship between the *vera icon* and the veneration of the Corpus Christi, their combination does not occur. Such a conflation is unimaginable, since consuming the consecrated host with Christ's face on it would imply cannibalism. The only apparent conflation of cultic heads and hearts that can be found seems to be a severely damaged picture in the church of the Beguinage in St Truiden, where a female saint is shown with a round *vera icon* on her breast [Fig. 3].¹⁸

¹⁷ Cameron A., "The Image of Edessa. The Telling of a Story", *Okeanos. Essays Presented to Ihor Sevchenko on his Sixtieth Birthday by His Colleagues and Students* (Cambridge Mass.: 1983) 80–94.

¹⁸ Mulder-Bakker A., *Verborgen Vrouwen. Kluizenaresen in de middeleeuwse stad* (Hilversum: 2007) 104–114.



Fig. 3. Unknown artist, *Female saint (Mary Magdalen) holding a vera icon against her breast* (ca. 1300). Fresco. Sint-Truiden, Begijnhofkerk. Image © Provincie Limburg – Provinciaal Centrum voor Cultureel Erfgoed (PCCE); photographer Eddy Daniels.

From the late thirteenth century onwards heart saints tend to become increasingly important, while the veneration of cephalophores slowly declined. This development reached a climax three hundred years later with 'cardiomaniacs' such as Maria Maddelena de'Pazzi, Catherine de'Ricci, Philip Neri, Angelo del Pas, Carlo Borromeo, Theresa of Avila and Carlo da Sezze. All of these saints were wounded in the heart by the arrow of God's love, with the divine fire constantly kindled there, while repeated visions of Jesus Christ induced them to fly to heaven. This contact with God left permanent traces in their hearts which existence were medically verified during the canonization process. At the same time medical experts classified the ferocious palpitations occasioned by extreme religious ardour as 'miraculous'. Symbolizing the eternal life they gave, many hearts became enlarged. Carlo Borromeo's, for example, reached the size of a head. Due to the craving for hearts, surgeons were hired to take the heart out of the body of a saint-to-be immediately after death and place it in a reliquary. This happened to Teresa of Avila, whose heart had experienced the famous *transverberatio* during her lifetime, the effect of which was still discernible according to the medical examiner. After she breathed her last, her heart was removed by a fellow sister who took it to her cell while it was still dripping with blood. It was then discovered that the heart was still alive, as its pounding broke several crystal containers.¹⁹ Obviously the message is that as signs of eternal life, which only God could bestow upon humankind, the hearts of very special mortals refused to stop beating.

The heads of Counter-Reformation saints seem to have played no comparable role, and no one attempted to transform them into head relics. These holy men and women are exemplifications of emotions and love and not known for their rational reasoning. One might state that at the very most they figuratively lost their heads when they were enraptured by God or wanted to ascend to Him. While there were popular heads of saints in the Early Modern Period, these were decapitated martyrs from the Bible and the Early Church, and precisely this category of saints was ideal for the reorientation of a reforming Church.²⁰ Fairly typical of the reception of such heads were the events surrounding the arrival of the head of the apostle Andrew at the Ponte Milvio in 1462. Apparently, Pope Pius II and his cardinals were so moved that they wept hot tears as they

¹⁹ Cannata P., *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, xii (Rome: 1976); "Teresa di Gesù. Roman Baroque Heart Saints", in Treffers B., *Een hemel op aarde. Extase in de Romeinse barok* (Nijmegen: 1995) chap. iii.

²⁰ See Jetze Touber in this volume.

cradled the relic against their breasts. After the fall of Byzantium, the head had been brought from Patras to Rome to join the remains of Andrew's brother Peter. The Pope not only ordered that the head be carried around Rome each morning but also that both the heads of Peter and Paul were to be displayed at St John Lateran in the afternoon. In the papal rhetoric surrounding the newly acquired head, the emphasis on love and wholeness is strikingly similar to the devotion to the heart in relation to contemporary saints. St Andrew's head was deemed equivalent to the Holy Ghost, constituting along with the heads of St Peter and Paul the Holy Trinity that was to liberate Byzantium from the Turks.

In the sixteenth century the relic was placed within one of the columns of the new St Peter's.²¹ At that time Church historical research introduced precious new head relics, but even the newly discovered martyrs from Antiquity could not compete in popularity with the innovative creation of heart relics produced by Counter-Reformation zeal. The only head saint who seems to have remained popular was John the Baptist, evidenced by the numerous popular St John's confraternities, which in Italy, very appropriately, attended to criminals given the death penalty. Nevertheless, even in the case of the Baptist his portrayal became less realistic, as the sculptural, near life-like depiction of the head of John the Baptist on a plate was replaced by two-dimensional representations of his severed head.²² The loss of iconicity due to this transformation cannot be underestimated – the painted head was a mere representation, shedding its bodily associations during an era in which the heart relic and sculpted heart triumphed.

Cardio Politics versus Capital Politics

Within the field of politics the head is obviously the most vigorous symbol, based on the preference for verticality, extending upwards towards the heavens.²³ Political theory in the Middle Ages retained this penchant from Antiquity and reinforced it with body metaphors from the New Testament. Soon this biblically supported hierarchy caused problems, when

²¹ Enea Silvio Piccolomini, *Enea Silvio Piccolomini/Pius II (1405–1464). Een humanistisch paus op de bres voor Europa*, eds. and transl. M. Goldsteen and Z. von Martels (Hilversum: 2011) *Commentarii* viii, 424–448.

²² See Barbara Baert in this volume.

²³ Survey: Struve T., *Entwicklung der organologischen Staatsauffassung im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: 1978).

due to a rising competition between the Church and State from the Carolingian era onwards, the body politic became increasingly politicized. A body could not bear two heads – the notion of bicephaly was considered monstrous. Popular schemes of societal structuring such as that of the three estates (nobles, clerics and commoners) complicated matters, but could be encompassed by a vertical hierarchy promoting the head as the leading part.

Philosophers dealt with the symbolic qualities of the various body parts in the social context, such as we encounter in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (1159). Their discussions also reflect the competition between various aspiring leaders *in physico*. Salisbury apparently granted the first place to the king, who was thought to act as the head. However, he was 'subject to the unique God and to those who are his lieutenants on earth, for in the human body the head is also governed by the soul'. Thus, without stating it explicitly, the first place was conferred upon the heart in the capacity of being the site of the soul.²⁴ The conflict between heart and head is already implicit in this tropology, waiting in ambush so to speak, and it only intensified when in the High Middle Ages organic metaphors became more popular due to the growing influence of Aristotle's natural philosophy and in the wake of the rise of medical science.²⁵

Le Goff has observed the proliferation of heart imagery and ideology between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries and saw that heart, conscience and self were increasingly placed on a par. Various sovereigns started to identify with the heart, as is apparent from instructions left by Louis IX to his son and successor Philip III or from the famous quarrel between another king of France, Philip the Fair, and Pope Boniface VIII. The anonymous treatise *Questio de potestate papae/Rex Pacificus* (ca. 1302), written in the context of the fatal confrontation between the two, shrewdly exploited the metaphor of the human being as microcosm. Given its reasoning by extension, the microcosm theory naturally favours the hidden organ, the heart, and its central position. The sovereign is said to be the equivalent of the heart, from which the veins that distribute the blood to each corner of the organism spring. As blood stands for vitality and the heart for giving life, it is clear that according to this way of thinking, the king, as the heart, surpasses the pope in status. Nevertheless, the latter is conceived of as the head, providing true doctrine to the other

²⁴ Le Goff, "Head or Heart" 17.

²⁵ Shogimen T., "Head or Heart? Revisited: Physiology and Political Thought in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", *History of Political Thought* 28 (2007) 208–228.

members of the body via the nerves and also representing another head, Christ.²⁶ Whether the philosopher opted for the head or heart, in both cases 'detached members' are beside the point. The body politic metaphor was merely used to foreground the essential naturalness of a healthy social order, which resembled a human being as a whole and could not be equated with a single organ.

Many publications address the topology of political body metaphors.²⁷ In view of our subject, severed heads and ripped-out hearts, it seems more enlightening to concentrate on real flesh and take a closer look at the practice of dissecting bodies, and specifically at how sovereigns were buried. Cadavers were disembowelled to prevent rapid putrefaction and enable transportation over a long distance and/or a period of lying in state. Only in cases of expected canonizations, such as in the case of Catherine of Siena, whose head was brought home to Siena, did post-mortem decapitations take place.²⁸ It was, however, common to separate the viscera of princes and potential saints, among which the heart and brain were initially both counted.²⁹ Only from the later Middle Ages onwards did it become customary to separate the heart from the other internal organs, leading to special heart burials. At first hearts were placed in urns or in ordinary graves, but soon precious silver or golden heart-shaped containers and even *cardiotaphia* became extremely popular. For example, the body of Anne of Brittany, queen of France, was interred in St Denis, but in 1514 her heart was laid to rest in her father's casket in Nantes [Fig. 4].³⁰

In some cases we find a separate grave for the entrails, the third cluster of principal organs, such as the monument to the intestines of the French King Charles V (d. 1380), erected in Maubuisson Abbey. On the grave it is suggested that the intestines are secured in a bag clasped to the king's breast [Fig. 5].³¹ French and English sovereigns created various

²⁶ Ibidem 20–23.

²⁷ Starting point: Kantorowicz E., *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: 1957). Also Bertelli S., *The King's Body. Sacred Rituals in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Pennsylvania: 2001).

²⁸ Parson G., *The Cult of Saint Catherine of Siena. A Study in Civil Religion* (Aldershot: 2008) 6, 20.

²⁹ Survey: Vauchez A. – Gregory T. (eds.), *Il cadavere = The Corpse* (Florence: 1999) and Brown E.A.R., "Authority, the Family, and the Dead in Late Medieval France", *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990) 803–832. Burial Practices: Westerhoff D., *Death and the Noble Body in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: 2008).

³⁰ Dietz A., *Ewige Herzen. Kleine Kulturgeschichte der Herzbestattungen* (Munich: 1998) 68–73.

³¹ Dietz, *Ewige Herzen* 62.



Fig. 4. Encased heart of Anne of Brittany (1514). Reliquary. Nantes, Dobrée Museum. Image © free copyright internet.

cultic places, distributing their principal organs across their kingdoms. The interment of detached royal body parts continued into the twentieth century. Up to and including the last empress Zita and probably her son Otto, the hearts of the Habsburg emperors were stored in special urns.³² This kind of treatment of their corpses, which may seem horrible to modern eyes, did not extend to the removal of their heads, and cases of preservation of the brain are very rare, the only traceable case being that of James II of England, who died in exile near Paris in 1701. Encased in a bronze-gilt urn, his brain was placed on top of a monument in the Scots College in Paris, while separate monuments were erected to both his body and heart in the monastery of the English Benedictines in Paris.³³

The other side of this cultic reverence for organs also deserves scrutiny with respect to the competition between the head and heart. What happened to the principal body parts during and after executions? Obviously, the head features as the star in trials. In the case of decapitations, the

³² Ibidem 89–105, and <http://www.kaisergruft.at>.

³³ Bradford C.A., *Heart Burial* (London: 1933) 214–215.



Fig. 5. Monument for the intestines of King Charles V (after 1374). Marble. From the Cistercian abbey of Maubuisson in Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, now preserved in Paris, Musée du Louvre. Image © Musée du Louvre.

head was often placed on a stake and considered to be a major attraction for the public. For example, after it had been exposed on a pole near London Bridge, Thomas More's daughter Margaret Roper paid for the head of her father and preserved it in a box with much devotion, before placing it in a vault in her local church.³⁴ Something similar happened to the head of Sir Walter Raleigh a century later. After its decollation, the head was stored in a leather bag which his wife kept for the rest of her life.³⁵ The handling of these remains echoed the practices surrounding saintly relics, although they remained much more confined to the private sphere.

In the case of criminals who committed extremely despicable acts, their hearts started to become main points of attention. In this, the notion of the heart as the condensed essence of man's identity again comes to the fore. In Canto 28 of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante and Virgil find themselves on the ninth Bolgia of the Inferno with the Sowers of Discord. They are confronted with political traitors who are repeatedly beheaded and walk cephalophore-style carrying their severed heads. Mohammed and his son-in-law, Ali, however, are portrayed cleft-through vertically, and to demonstrate that they had forfeited their consciences, their hearts are repeatedly laid bare. It is interesting to note that the Dutch language uses the word 'laaghartig' in this context – literally 'low hearted' – which is connected to the English 'faint-hearted' and 'heartless'. 'Laaghartig' was also used to describe the awful deed of Balthasar Gerards, who gunned down William the Silent in 1584. The traitor assassin was soon caught and ritually slaughtered, with the hand used to fire the gun being burned off before he was quartered alive and his heart cut out as evidence of his cowardliness and thrown in his face [Fig. 6]. Finally, his head was cut off and exposed on a stake behind his victim's lodgings.³⁶ Of course, it was immediately stolen by staunch Roman Catholics, becoming a head relic which resurfaced in Cologne. Dutch Catholics of the day approached the mighty cardinal and Church historian Caesar Baronius with a petition to start a process of beatification of the recent martyr. Despite the ready-made relic, the request was politely declined, another indication that to become a saint in the sixteenth century one needed a warm heart and not merely to secure a head.³⁷

³⁴ Bradford, *Heart Burial* 13.

³⁵ Ibidem 221 n. 2.

³⁶ De Baar P., *Balthasar G.* (Amsterdam: 1984) 59.

³⁷ De Baar, *Balthasar G.* 79–82.



Fig. 6. Frans Hogenberg, *Carving out the heart of Balthasar Gerards* (1584). Coloured woodcut illustration. Image © Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam.

The Embodied Soul

‘Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”’ (*Matthew 22:37*). The sequential wording in this biblical text reveals how difficult it is to comprehend the essence of humanity and associate it with a specific organ; however, the passage reveals that the soul guides the struggle between head and heart. Thus, we must unravel this triangular relationship, as well as the connection with emerging concepts of selfhood and interiority. The soul was regarded as the source of human thought and actions and this principle of life was increasingly connected to the bodies of living beings. Only in the seventeenth century a rift occurred, when due to research on the brain, the soul came to be disconnected from the body and eventually was regarded as immaterial.

The respective significance of head, heart, soul, and conscience in the Old and New Testaments was often the point of departure in discussions – even more so as religious leaders increasingly used biblical quotations.

The connection between heart and conscience was rather unproblematic, as discerning between right and wrong was clearly connected to the heart, where the laws of God were inscribed. In the Pauline interpretation, the heart also functioned as the seat of the vital forces and inner life, as the origin of expression and understanding. This implied that one could only encounter the divine in the heart: 'And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God' (*Romans* 8:27). There thus remains the question of what the place of the soul is in this scheme. Originally, it was seen as the breath of life, which God breathed into Adam through his nostrils and which left the body after death. In this respect the concept of the soul approaches the Greek concepts *pneuma* and *psyche*, both of which refer to an individual human being or self in all its interiority and completeness. Paul found this extensive range of connotations difficult to grasp:

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 *Thessalonians* 5:16–24).³⁸

In the medieval and Renaissance scholarly traditions ideas concerning the soul were primarily treated in the context of natural philosophy. The reading of Aristotle's *De anima* was obligatory in the faculties of arts, often supplemented with his *Parva naturalia*, which also contained much psychological information. In this discourse, the soul represented the life-giving principle – that which distinguished animate beings from non-living things. Henceforth, it was considered to be the source and cause of the functions and activities of plants, animals and human beings. As a consequence of the full reception of Aristotle's works in natural philosophy, scholars in the thirteenth century started to argue about the nature of the soul and the types of the soul in combination with its faculties, such as will, appetite, memory and imagination. Since the ties between natural philosophy and medicine were particularly strong, it is not surprising that

³⁸ Dufour, *Wörterbuch*, s.v. Gewissen (197/198), Herz (221), Seele (364/365), Geist (186).

medical ideas concerning the soul were brought into the debate, with the head/brain and the heart becoming focal points.³⁹

Although scholars were mostly interested in topics pertaining to the intellective soul, such as immortality and intellection, for our physically oriented discussion of head versus heart, the organic soul should be considered primary.⁴⁰ It was seen as being responsible for the vital functions which took place in the bodies of living beings and consequently as being dependent on the organs. The tasks vary from digestion, reproduction and emotion to imagination and memory. Only will and intellect were excluded, as they were not supposed to rely on physical organs and therefore could survive after the body's demise. For this article it seems wise to focus on the reasoning of the German Carthusian Gregorius Reisch, as his exposition provides typical medieval reasoning concerning the head and the heart. His book also demonstrates that in matters of head and heart religious and medical conceptions were closely connected. This learned monk, who had many friends at the University of Freiburg, published an extremely influential and popular philosophical handbook entitled *Margaritha philosophica* (1503). The book is still well known today, albeit mainly because of its famous picture of a head, including the operations of the senses, which the author considered to be interpreted in its interior [Fig. 7]. Another picture from the same section on the origin of natural things confirms Reisch's preference for the threefold division of the human body. He combined Aristotle with Galen's *On the Natural Faculties* and Neo-Platonic authors, ideas which had been elaborated upon by Arab authors such as Avicenna and Averroes [Fig. 8].⁴¹

More specifically, we are referring to the theory of the triple division of the body into three 'ventricles', each with a principal member: the skull with the brain, the thorax cavity with the heart and the abdomen with the liver.⁴² These principal members were said to develop first in a foetus and be the last to depart the mortal body, with the heart as *primus inter*

³⁹ Survey on aspects of the soul: Park K. – Kessler E., "The Concept of Psychology", in Skinner Q. – Kessler E. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1988) 453–463.

⁴⁰ Survey: Park K., "The Organic Soul", in Skinner Q. – Kessler E. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1988) 464–484. In the same handbook Kessler discusses the intellective soul, 484–534.

⁴¹ On this book: Cunningham A. – Kusakawa S., *Natural Philosophy Epitomised. Books 8–11 of Gregor Reisch's Philosophical Pearl (1503)* (London: 2010).

⁴² Principal members: Siraisi N., *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine* (Chicago: 1990) 107–109.

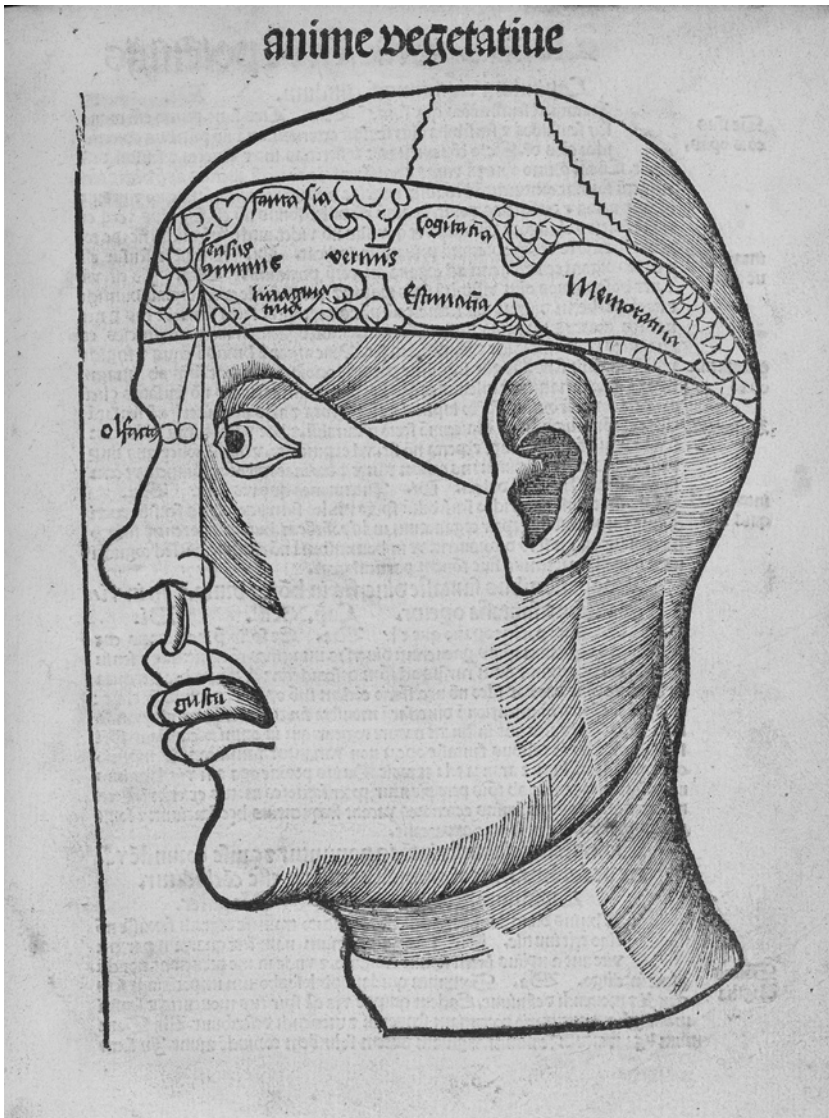


Fig. 7. "Brain diagram", illustration in Gregorius Reisch's *Margaritha philosophica* (1503). Woodcut. Image © University Library, Groningen.

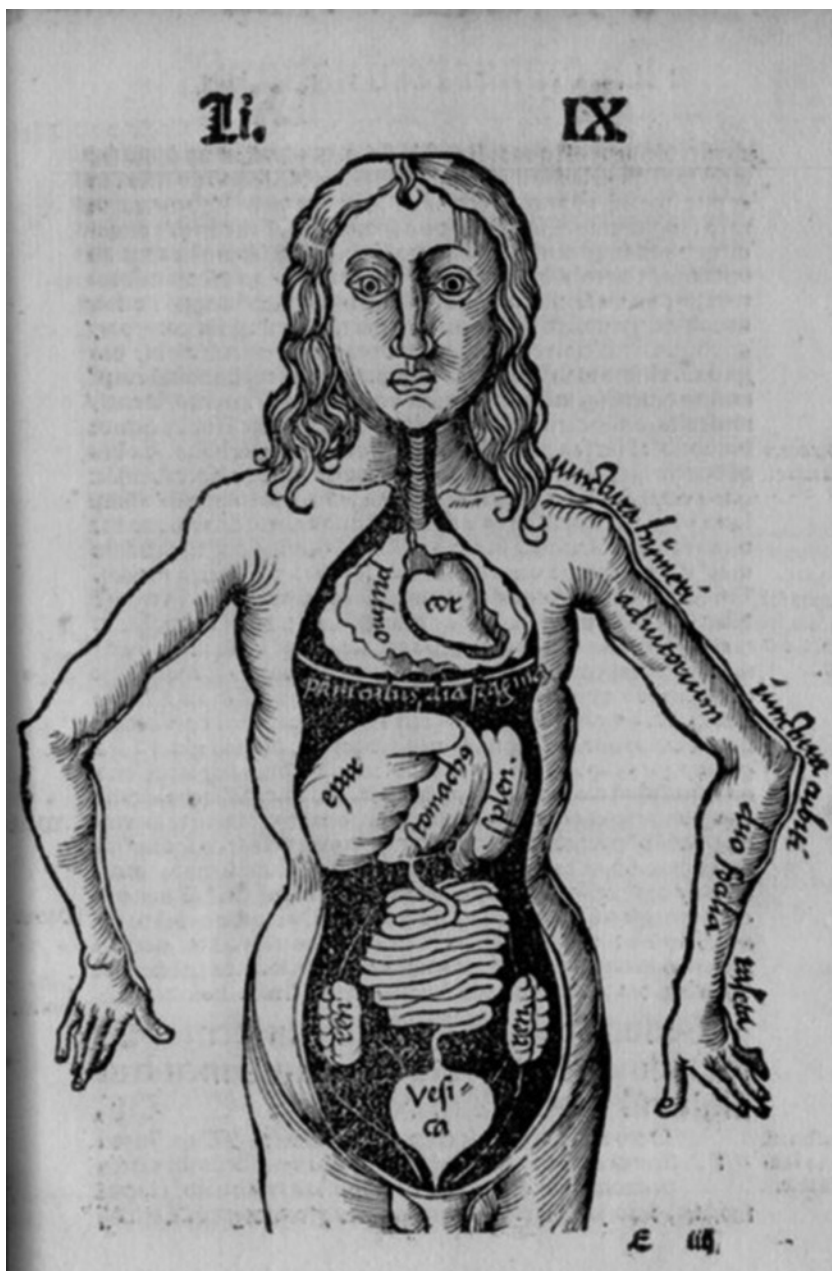


Fig. 8. "Scheme of the principal members of the human body", illustration in Gregorius Reisch's *Margaritha philosophica* (1503). Woodcut. Image © University Library, Groningen.

pares. According to Aristotle, the heart was the source of heat and life, and as a result governed the body, while the Galenists taught that the three principle members each imparted a *principium*, or ruling principle, to a specific group of organs and functions, but nevertheless he singled out the brain as the ruling body part.

Aristotle discerned three kinds of soul: the intellective, the sensitive and the vegetative, each connected to specific faculties, often described as virtues. These powers were further subdivided into vital, animal and natural elements which functioned on the basis of their own *spiritus*. It was considered that vital virtues guaranteed the maintenance of life and belonged to the heart and the arteries, while the animal virtues were interpreted as psychological operations. Arterial blood was found to be produced in the heart and to carry the *spiritus vitalis* throughout the body. In the brain this was transformed by the *rete mirabile* into *spiritus animalis*, which allowed a person to think and interpret the senses. The natural virtues or the nutritive and vegetative aspects of the soul were governed by the liver. The veins were supposed to transport the *spiritus naturalis* which originated in that organ. It is clear that this ordering is essentially hierarchical and problematic in view of the division of tasks between the head and the heart.

Medieval medical professors were forced to devise compromises between Aristotle and Galen. The famous Padovan professor, Pietro d'Abano (1257–1318), whose work was published far into the sixteenth century, ultimately preferred the heart as the domicile of the soul. Reading his famous *Conciliator differentiarum*, it becomes clear nonetheless that he did not abandon the brain entirely, which together with the liver he also hailed as a principal organ. The heart merely held a 'primary primacy', one could say. To substantiate this, he borrowed the doctrine of the essential unity of the Trinity in God from theology, arguing that the principal members of the body could also be said to refer to one organ, the heart.⁴³

Most authors, including Gregorius Reisch, followed this type of eclectic reasoning. In book 10 of the *Margarita*, the soul is defined in Aristotelian terms as the 'first actuality of a natural body with organs', on the basis of which the author explains the physical processes behind the emotions, vision, thinking and memory, for example, as well as the organs that

⁴³ Peter of Abano, *Conciliator differentiarum philosophorum et precipue medicorum* (Venice, L. Lauredano: 1504) fol. 56r. See on this also Shogimen, "Head or Heart".

produce them.⁴⁴ The famous picture of the head is used to clarify memory, that is, 'the retention of past sense images in the form of eddies in the vapours that fill the posterior ventricle of the brain'.⁴⁵ Emotional states were attributed to the heart, with anger, for example, originating in the impulse to resist evil. Its physical manifestation was the dilation of the heart that pushed the blood towards the extremities, explaining why the face of an angry person becomes red and that of a timid person grows pale.⁴⁶ These two cases show that the spirits to which the organs resorted for their functioning came to be regarded as the 'first instruments of the soul'. Moreover, they were often barely discernable from the (Holy) Spirit itself, which offered possibilities to escape the head versus heart dilemma. Reisch was also concerned with the soul in both an Aristotelian and a Christian sense, expanding on these doctrines which he considered to be clashing at times. He stated wisely that the author of the Book of Wisdom had countered the opinions of ancient philosophers, arguing that 'our breath is merely smoke, and reason is a spark from the beat of our hearts' (*Book of Wisdom*, Vulgate version 2:2).⁴⁷

This interpretation was further developed in the wake of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The German Reformer Philip Melanchthon asserted that if one wanted to unravel the secrets of the soul, one had to study the organs of the body.⁴⁸ In his discussion of the soul he (and many other sixteenth-century philosophers) introduced anatomical arguments from medical science. This interest, which was of course also fuelled by his Reforming zeal, led him to write a commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*. In 1540, he published a *Commentarius de anima* which, after having read Andreas Vesalius *Fabrica de humani corporis*, he revised thoroughly and saw it to print under the title *Liber de anima recognitus* (1552). In the latter, the soul was called the general principle of all human beings. In line with his religious position, Melanchthon was above all interested in the nature of the human being as a whole, in other words, as a unity, which he claimed to be genuinely Christian. In accordance with the teachings of Luther, he judged human beings to be a combination of body and soul,

⁴⁴ The examples were taken from Park, "Organic Soul" 468–469.

⁴⁵ Cunningham – Kusakawa, *Natural Philosophy* 215–217.

⁴⁶ Ibidem 217.

⁴⁷ Ibidem 149–150, 253.

⁴⁸ This paragraph is based on: Kusakawa S., *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy. The Case of Philip Melanchthon* (Cambridge: 1995) 75–123, esp. 88–91.

both being subject to salvation. His conclusion was that despite the tremendous amount of human learning, it was not possible to fully explain the human soul, as ultimately God was behind its workings.

Although he retains Galen's tripartite soul and the notion of the three principal members, on the whole Melanchthon favours the heart, while paying little attention to the brain. The usual distinction between the rational and the sensitive soul can be found in his laudatory poem on Vesalius' *Fabrica*, with God bestowing his wisdom upon the brain, but justice, pain, feelings and even God's anger being placed in the heart.⁴⁹ Although the power of the brain is fully acknowledged in Melanchthon's works, the heart is judged to be more crucial as it can discern good from evil. This implied that devils could occupy the heart. They were able to taint 'the spirits in heart and brain, to impede judgment and produce manifest madness, and to drive the heart and other limbs to the cruellest movements'. Examples of such disasters are provided, such as Medea killing her children and Judas committing suicide.⁵⁰ This concurs with the conclusion of the first edition of his *Liber de anima*, in which it was claimed that:

I beseech God with all my heart, that we may know the Archetype, and we may honour it correctly, since He has made our souls in such a way that an image of Him impressed in our souls shine through and since He gave us his son Jesus Christ for the restoration of that image so that he may renew in us those images by the Holy Spirit.⁵¹

Over time, the Holy Spirit would become increasingly important to the reformer, obtaining an almost physical reality, as it manifests itself in human beings.⁵²

Melanchthon envisaged the body as an example of exquisite design by the divine Architect. A commensurable reading of Aristotle and Galen is found in Italy, where the influence of natural philosophy in the universities was immense. In combination with the devotion to saintly hearts mentioned above and the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation – just before the unmasking of the heart as a muscle in the

⁴⁹ Kusakawa, *Melanchthon* 114–118, facsimile of the poem, 116–117.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem* 120.

⁵¹ *Ibidem* 98.

⁵² *Ibidem* 120 and Walker D.P., "Medical Spirits and God and the Soul", in Fattori M. – Bianchi M. (eds.) *Spiritus. IV° Colloquio Internazionale Roma, 7–9 gennaio 1983* (Rome: 1984) 223–244.

seventeenth century – the organ's popularity rose to its greatest height in several domains. One of its greatest advocates was the Pisan and Roman professor Andrea Cesalpino, who also functioned as a physician to several popes. He studied medicine at Pisa, where the leading minds of his day, anatomists Realdo Colombo and Gabriele Fallopio, introduced him to the latest developments. Colombo especially must have exerted a major influence, since he discovered the 'pulmonary circulation of blood' – that all of the blood goes from the right ventricle of the heart through the lungs before returning to the left ventricle, a discovery that would be further explored by Cesalpino.

Despite the newly acquired knowledge of Galen in Greek as well as many Platonic and Neo-Platonic sources, Cesalpino championed the full rehabilitation of Aristotle for both medical and religious reasons. This involved the complete triumph of the heart and a downplaying of the role of the brain. In a sense, although furnished with many more medical facts and arguments, he continued the work of his former philosophy professor, Simone Porzio, who wrote the much acclaimed *De humana mente disputatio* (1551), in which he emphasized the individual and corruptible form of the body, a position that Cesalpino found very difficult to maintain on religious grounds. While Porzio found himself in trouble with the Inquisition, Cesalpino seems to have gone completely the other way, holding extreme and devout Counter-Reformational beliefs. His devotion drove him into the arms of the Roman religious leader Philip Neri and his Oratory. The most famous heart patient of his time, Neri suffered from palpitations which were believed to be directly related to his celestial contacts, as can be discerned from several illustrations in his vita. At the moment of contact with God, it was said that his heart started to pound heavily and the divine heat it produced pulsated throughout his body. Sometimes he became so hot that he started to ascend. Later, Cesalpino was involved in Neri's canonization process and commented on the nature of this heat, declaring it to be of supernatural origin.

His Aristotelian background, in combination with his Counter-Reformation convictions, led Cesalpino to accommodate his medical views to Catholic doctrine and practice, resulting in a synthesis of faith and reason. Blood and the heart played the leading roles in his Aristotelian-based 'medicina theologica', while God functioned as the one and only constituent cause of all things and as first mover. In its constitution as a 'little world', Cesalpino claims, everything the human body contained could also be found in the universe. Intelligence and human souls were parts of

God, who, as the universal soul, permeated all reality. Like Melanchthon he valued the Aristotelian ‘calor innatus’ as man’s most precious matter and purest substance, since the divine ‘virtus’ manifested itself there. This accounted for the fact that the body was constructed in utter wisdom as an uninterrupted whole, in fact as a container in which blood procured spirit through the body in order to keep it alive. The imagery used to explain this is telling. In humans, the heart functioned as the equivalent to the sun. This meant that the soul held domicile in the heart, the centre of human life. Cesalpino repeatedly quoted Aristotle as proof, who, as mentioned above, claimed in his *De Anima* that the heart was the first organ to come to life in a foetus and the last organ to stop functioning in a dying man. In accordance with his hero, Cesalpino claimed that this organ spread the vital heat throughout the body, just as the sun provided sunlight. He compared the brain to the moon, which received the warmth of the sun and adapted it further. The author even went as far as to deny the brain to be the origin of the nerves – in his eyes these were merely very fine arteries, also originating in the heart.

Although Cesalpino’s pupil William Harvey understood the circulation of blood more accurately, overcoming the faulty qualitative reasoning of his teacher, he agreed with most of his Aristotelian findings. The primacy of the heart was maintained and the brain was certainly not put on a pedestal.⁵³ In Chapter 8 of the *De motu cordis*, Cesalpino’s heavenly imagery is reused in a description of the circulation of blood. In the translation by brain specialist Robert Wills, Harvey’s twofold praise of the heart concludes with the following:

This motion we may be allowed to call circular, in the same way as Aristotle says that the air and the rain emulate the circular motion of the superior bodies [...]. And similarly does it come to pass in the body, through the motion of the blood, that the various parts are nourished, cherished, quickened by the warmer, more perfect, vaporous, spirituous, and, as I may say, alimentive blood; which on the other hand, owing to its contact with these parts, becomes cooled, coagulated, and so to speak effete. It then returns to its sovereign, the heart, as if to its source, or to the inmost home of the body, there to recover its state of excellence or perfection. Here it renews its fluidity, natural heat and becomes powerful, fervid, a kind of treasury of life, and impregnated with spirits, it might be said with balsam. Thence

⁵³ Cesalpino’s views are extensively discussed in Santing C., “Deus Rotator and the Microrotator. Blood as the Source of Life in the Work of Andreas Cesalpino”, in Santing C. – Touber J. (eds.), *Blood. Symbol Liquid* (Louvain: 2012) 137–155.

again it is dispersed. All this depends on the motion and action of the heart. The heart, consequently, is the beginning of life: the sun of our microcosm, even as the sun in his turn might well be designated the heart of the world: for it is the heart by whose virtue and pulse the blood is moved, perfected, and made nutrient, and is preserved from corruption and coagulation: it is the household divinity which, discharging its function, nourishes, cherishes, quickens the whole body, and is indeed the foundation of life, the source of all action.⁵⁴

The End of Wholeness

Reading Melanchthon, Cesalpino and Harvey the tendency to cling to the notion of the wholeness of human being in relation to the universe is apparent and in the context of religious and political strife fully understandable. Descartes was also not ready to give up the idea of a connection and interaction between body and soul. In this respect, he pointed to the pineal gland, a tiny organ in the centre of the brain, which was seen as a sort of valve that directed the animal spirits. Henceforth, the essence of man would reside in the head, with the heart merely the generator preserving warmth in the body. It was also in the pineal gland that the emotions influenced the rational soul. With this the locus of the essence of man had moved upwards and this ascent ultimately proved definitive.⁵⁵ Today it is common knowledge that the brain governs the organs and is also responsible for the emotions and passions. To cite Antonio Damasio, 'the heart is really located in the brain'.⁵⁶

The fact that Descartes's own skull is still on display in the Parisian Musée de l'Homme seems appropriate as he became the focus of a scientific cult of rational essentialism [Fig. 9]. Descartes called the soul *res cogitans*, while the rest of body was merely *res extensae* – nature and matter. Such a scheme defines human being in terms of the ability to think, and this self-consciousness is strongly connected to the brain. With this, the soul was linked to the use of reason and conscious decision-making, its ties with substance completely severed. However imminent the triumph

⁵⁴ Harvey W., *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*. Netlibrary 21.

⁵⁵ Survey: Høystad O.M., *A History of the Heart* (Chicago: 2007) 153–156.

⁵⁶ Damasio A., *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: 1994) esp. postscriptum, "The Human Heart in Conflict". Survey: Wear A., "Medicine in Early Modern Europe", in Conrad L.I. (ed.), *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800* (Cambridge: 1995) 207–363, esp. 325–362.

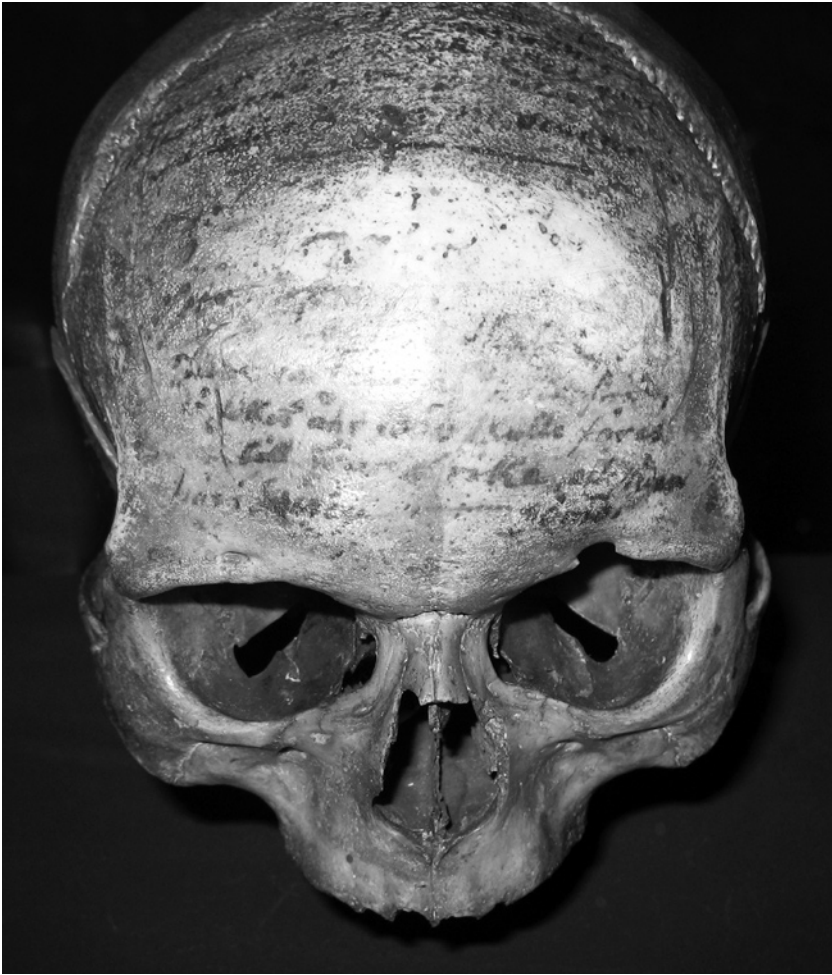


Fig. 9. Skull of René Descartes. Paris, Musée de l'homme. Image © free copyright internet.

of the brain then seemed, it took centuries before its primacy was fully acknowledged, as its mysteries were extremely difficult to fathom.

Sixteenth-century anatomists started by explaining away the *rete mirabile*, the organ which supposedly extracted the animal spirits from the blood, as a network of vessels at the base of the brain only to be found in cattle. Johann Dryander, professor of medicine at Marburg University, was the first to record his anatomical findings concerning the head in an illustrated work, *Anatomia capitis humana* (1536/1537) [Fig. 10]. There he



Fig. 10. "Dissected head", illustration in Johannes Dryander's *Anatomia capitis humana* (1536/1537). Woodcut. Image © Wellcome Library London.

depicted actual severed heads, rather peculiarly cut off and therefore not reminiscent of decapitated heads at all. They rest on their chins in the style of the Mandylion, to emphasize the mortality of human flesh. By peeling back several layers of the human brain, readers are familiarized with its specific parts and their presumed functions.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Lind L.R., *Studies in Pre-Vesalian Anatomy. Biography, Translations, Documents* (Philadelphia: 1975), and Singer C., "Brain Dissection before Vesalius", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 11 (1956) 261–275.

An important additional step was taken by Andreas Vesalius, who concluded that memory and imagination did not have their homes in specific parts of the brain, as he had learned during his student days in Louvain on the basis of the ideas of Gregorius Reisch [Fig. 7].⁵⁸ In general, Vesalius adopted the Galenic three ventricle theory and maintained his distance from 'Stoics and Peripatetics', who stated that 'the heart is the court of the soul and that the nerves arise from it'. Only the emotions, which Vesalius referred to as the 'irascible soul', belonged to the heart. The 'reigning soul by which we imagine, meditate and remember', was to be found in the brain and was aided by the senses which furnished it with information from the external world.⁵⁹ Reasoning was considered to be undertaken by the rational soul – bestowed upon us by the Universal Creator, God – which man had in common with the angels.⁶⁰

This did not hinder Vesalius from investigating the structure and substance of the brain, which resulted in him disproving the theory of the brain ventricles as the site of mental processes. Subsequently, medical attention shifted to the *gyri* or convolutions of the brain.⁶¹ The extensive nature of the dissection process, as for Dryander, is illustrated by a series of increasingly dissected heads. Although they are rather graphic because of the abundant moustache and other facial hair portrayed, the heads are illustrated with the bottom jaw apparently removed. This seems to have a very rational reason – a pictorial view into a human head from above dictated this to a certain degree. Although Vesalius' medical illustrations were generally heavily influenced by religious iconography, this style of depiction is far removed from that of the head of John the Baptist on a plate, as well as from Vanity scenes [Fig. 11].

The first real contributions to the unravelling of the knots of the brain occurred in the seventeenth century, when after having dissected numerous brains, Thomas Willis published his *Cerebri anatome* of 1664, a treatise followed by other writings on the diseases and qualities of the brain, including the location of the soul or souls [Fig. 12]. The brain was considered the source of movement and ideas. The cranial nerves proved that the functions of the brain were not to be found in the 'ventricles' but in

⁵⁸ Despised and corrected by Vesalius in his *Fabrica* in the introduction to the book on the brain. Translation by Singer C., *Vesalius on the Human Brain. Introduction, Translation of Text. Translation of Descriptions of Figures. Notes to the Translation. Figures* (Oxford: 1952) 5–8.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem* 40.

⁶¹ Vesalius, *Fabrica* VII, ch xi and xii, see Singer, *Vesalius on the Brain* 46–56.

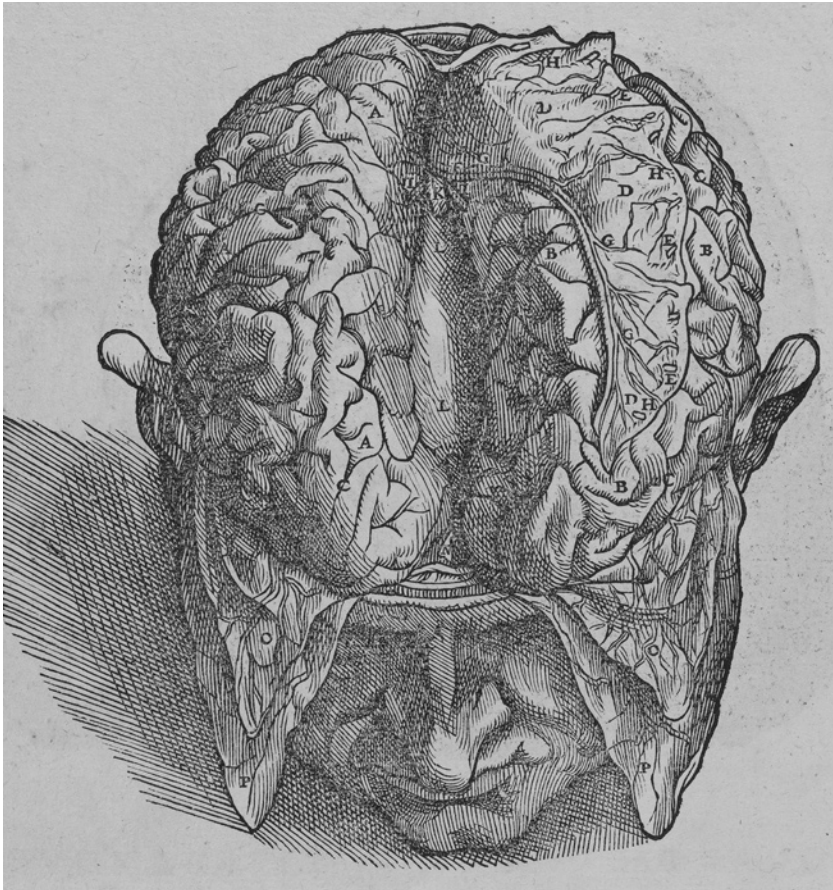


Fig. 11. "Dissected head with gyri of the brain", illustration in Andreas Vesalius' *Fabrica* (Basel, 1543), book VII, fig. 3. Woodcut. Image © University Library Groningen.

the different parts of the tissue itself, in other words, in the flesh. In addition, Willis distinguished between an immortal and immaterial rational soul and a perishable sensitive soul, both of which were located in the brain.⁶² As it was the cerebellum which now formed the animal spirits

⁶² Clarke E. – Dewhurst K. – Aminoff M.J., *An Illustrated History of the Brain Function. Imaging the Brain from Antiquity to the Present* (San Francisco: 1996) 65f. On Willis: Martensen R.L., *The Brain Takes Shape. An Early History* (New York: 2004), and Zimmer C., *Soul Made Flesh. The Discovery of the Brain and How it Changed the World* (New York: 2004). Survey of medical developments: Wear, "Medicine in Early Modern Europe" 347–349.



Fig. 12. Title page to Thomas Willis' *Cerebri anatome* (Amsterdam: Gerard Schagen 1666). Woodcut. Image © University Library Amsterdam.

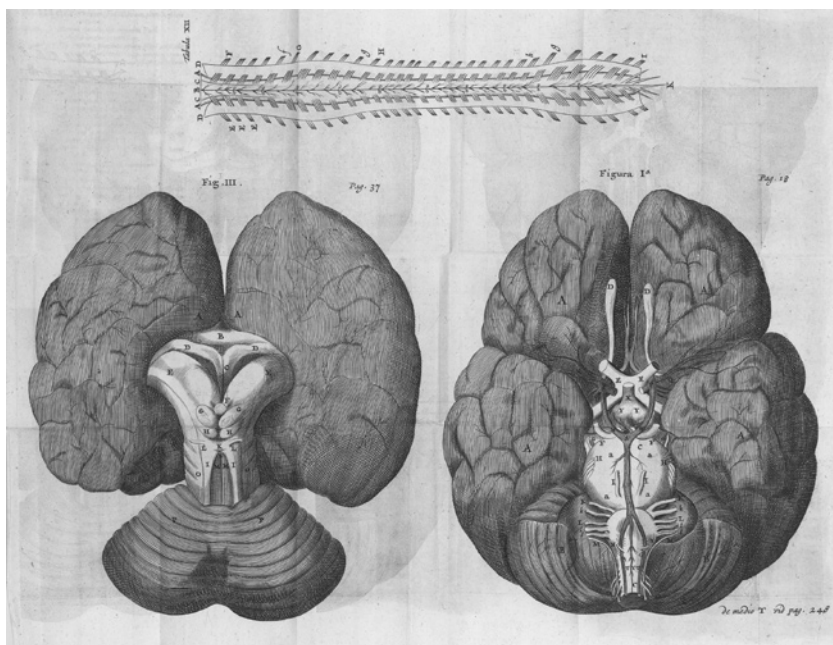


Fig. 13. "Representation of the base of a human brain revealing the circle of Willis", illustration in Thomas Willis' *Cerebri anatome* (Amsterdam: Gerard Schagen 1666). Woodcut. Image © University Library Amsterdam.

that carried messages to the heart and other parts of the body, he concluded that the heart was only a machine and not the site of the sensitive soul. As a result of this research, Galen's vital soul, governing the emotions in the heart, was dispensed with altogether. The organ subsequently lost its right to be called the moral centre of the human being, as well as its value to Christianity [Fig. 13].

Conclusion

It might be argued that in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance there was no battle between head and heart. The actual establishment of a hierarchy of organs depended on what one judged to be essential in a human being. Do emotions and conscience or the *ratio* constitute the self? It was only in the wake of Thomas Willis's publications that verticality prevailed over centrality, which until then had been the primary

concern. The superabundance of detached heads in the same period can therefore only be explained in terms of a chiasmus.

On the one hand, firstly, the primordial importance of the heart meant that there were no taboos associated with the representation of detached heads. Secondly, the revival of interest in the Early Church with the overall significance of early martyrs, who for the major part had been decapitated, also explains the existence of so many detached heads. This also makes clear why most depictions of decapitation scenes were set in an antique environment. Thirdly, studies of the criminal justice system have revealed that decapitation was very rare, being reserved for aristocrats and other members of the elite. Losing one's head was therefore relatively honourable.⁶³

On the other hand, whatever the lack of concern for the treatment of various kinds of detached heads, for religious reasons there was a reluctance to explicitly embrace the brain and adopt the accompanying body-soul dichotomy. For obvious reasons, Roman Catholicism would not benefit from such a dichotomy and therefore embraced the notion of unity and universality. We have seen that adherents of the Reformed Churches, such as Melanchthon and Harvey, held the same beliefs and focused on the warm heart. After the conflicts and wars of the Early Modern Period, society longed for harmony. Natural philosophers, physicians and theologians were ultimately members of a social order that longed for unanimity, and this was reflected in their writings. The centrally located and centrally oriented heart was a far more attractive symbol of a healthy macrocosm and microcosm than the readily removable protruding head. In this respect, the account of their roles in the seventeenth century by Scott Manning Stevens in his essay 'Sacred Heart and Secular Brain' is far too modern. Even today, as the secrets of the brain are increasingly being discovered the heart still speaks another language, one which has outlived all the advances in heart surgery, including transplants. Valentine's Day reveals the heart's overwhelming symbolic strength. Let me quote Ole M. Høystad, who wrote the intriguing book, *A History of the Heart*: by way of an appropriate conclusion 'The brain is a fact, not an image. The heart is both'.⁶⁴

⁶³ Carlino A., *Books of the Body. Anatomical Ritual and Renaissance Learning* (Chicago and London: 1999) 94.

⁶⁴ Høystad, *Heart* 12.

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